

Mixed Bathing in Another Dimension

Heavenly Bath of the Seven Goddess Sisters

7

Volume Seven

Nagaharu Hibihana
Illust. = Masakage Hagiya



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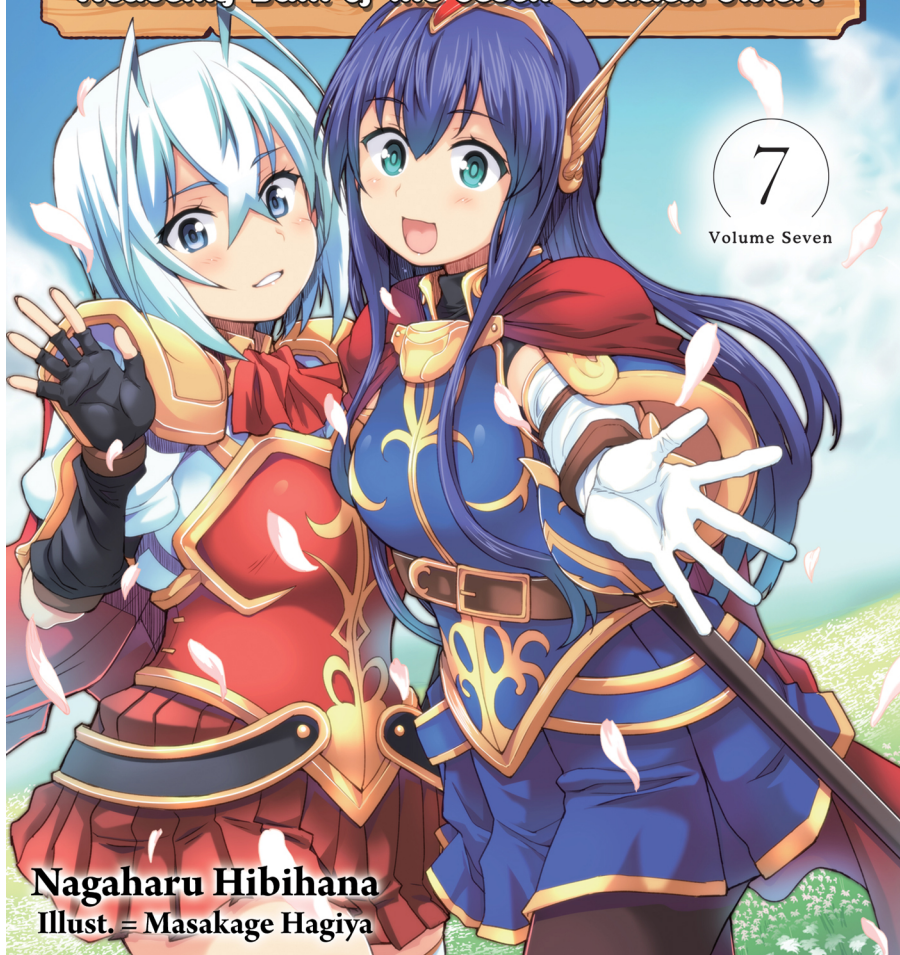
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HARUNO
SHINONOHE

A HERO SUMMONED FROM
ANOTHER WORLD LIKE TOUYA.
SHE AND TOUYA HAVE REUNITED.



TOUYA HOUTOU

A HERO WITH A GIFT CALLED THE
UNLIMITED BATH. GETS FIRED UP AT
THE THOUGHT OF MIXED BATHING.



YUKINA HOUTOU

TOUYA'S YOUNGER SISTER.
REINCARNATED AS A DEMON
THROUGH THE HERO OF
DARKNESS SUMMONING RITUAL.

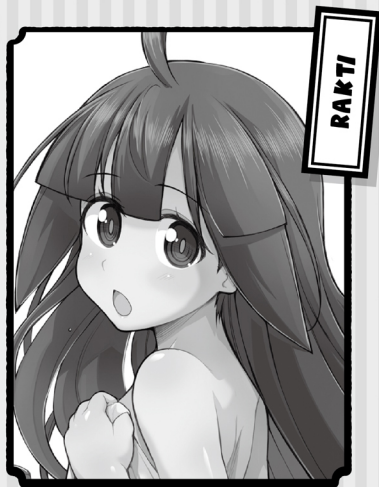


CLENA

A GIRL TRAVELING WITH
TOUYA. THE GRANDDAUGHTER
OF THE DEMON LORD.



CLENA'S ATTENDANT.
A LYCAON, A WOLF
DEMI-HUMAN.



THE GODDESS OF
DARKNESS. YOUNGEST OF
THE SIX GODDESS SISTERS.

WHAT'S HAPPENED SO FAR

TOUYA HOUJOU IS SUMMONED TO A PARALLEL WORLD TO DEFEAT THE DEMON LORD. HE'S GRANTED A SPECIAL POWER, BUT IT'S... THE POWER TO OPEN A DOOR TO A BATH ANYTIME AND ANYWHERE, THE UNLIMITED BATH. TOUYA'S PARTY ARRIVES IN THE CAVE KINGDOM OF ARES, WHERE THE DEMON LORD'S ARMY IS BASED. THEY ACCIDENTALLY BREAK THE DEMON LORD'S SEAL, BUT ONCE THEY FIND OUT THAT THE WAR BETWEEN THE DEMON LORD AND THE SACRED KING WAS AN ECONOMIC WAR, THEY MANAGE TO RECONCILE WITH HIM. NOW THEY HAVE ONE PROBLEM LEFT TO TACKLE—RESCUING THE HERO COSMOS, WHO WAS KIDNAPPED BY KNIGHTS FROM JUPITER.



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Presented by Nagaharu Hibihana / Illust. = Masakage Hagiya

Pre-Bath — Prologue

My name is Touya Houjou. For what it's worth, I hold the title of a Hero of the (Temple of the) Goddess (of Light), though I'm not really sure if I live up to that name. Come to think of it, I've never really introduced myself by that title, so I probably don't need to sweat it too much.

If we're being honest, my current role was less about being a "hero" and more about being "the new little brother of the goddess sisters." This turn of events came about because, apparently, I could interact with the sisters' mother, the Goddess of Chaos, in their dreams.

At first, I wasn't able to remember meeting her in those dreams, but after spending every morning and night praying, I'd become able to vaguely remember seeing her in them.

I'd also wanted to raise an objection about becoming Rakti's younger brother, but seeing her try to behave like an older sister in spite of being so small was charming enough for me to let it go.

Anyway, we'd gone through various trials and tribulations, including accidentally reviving the demon lord in Ares. It turned out he wasn't intending to start another war, so in the end, we were able to prevent the birth of a new demon lord.

In the meantime, Cosmos, a Hero of the Sacred King, had been kidnapped. The group that kidnapped him had also stolen his ship and fled, and we were currently pursuing them in the Grande Nautilus. However, it had taken us some time to prepare to set sail, so there was no way we could catch up to them as it was.

"We won't be able to catch up to them like this," Achilles said, rubbing his beard. He was a former general from Jupiter and a party member of one of the other Heroes of the Sacred King, Natsuki Kannami.

"That ship is custom-made, after all..." Princess Franchellis replied, hanging her head. Cosmos's ship was a high performance vessel built for the royal family; it was no wonder why the kidnappers took it.

Right now, the Grande Nautilus—or more specifically, the Unlimited Bath inside—was hosting not only my and Haruno's parties, but also Kannami's and Cosmos's parties.

My party members were Yukina, Clena, Roni, Rium, Rakti,

Rulitora, Pardoe, Mark, Shakova, Crissa, Brahms, and Mem—and Phoenix, I guess. Haruno's party, which was essentially both hers and mine at this point, comprised Sera, Sandra, Rin, Lumis, Daisy, and Prae. Kannami's party was small—just him, Achilles, and the Beast King. Cosmos's party (excluding himself) included Princess Franchellis, Foley, Balsamina, and Ricott, captain of the imperial guards (along with the guard force she led).

Counting the imperial guards, we were a group of about fifty. If it weren't for the growth of the Unlimited Bath, there was no way the Grande Nautilus could have fit all of us.

"Where in the world is that ship heading?" Haruno asked.

"It's sailing along the bay, so it must be headed to Neptunopolis," Achilles responded.

Are they planning on switching to a land route afterward?

"Fortunately, they're still on our radar," Achilles continued. "Let's keep up the pace and not lose sight of them."

We'll catch up to them in Neptunopolis and take back Cosmos. That's our only goal. The princess must be on edge, but we can't do anything else for her right now. We just have to keep chasing them.

The princess must have been worried sick for Cosmos ever since we'd set sail, but she'd kept composed, perhaps so she wouldn't worry the rest of us. Thanks to her resolve, things hadn't gotten too tense. Her imperial guards had come to enjoy using the pool, and they'd once again taken the princess there to relax with them, but kicking back was surely the last thing on her mind.

Meanwhile, Kannami had become immersed in books—though that was partially because we had packed so much cargo into the Unlimited Bath that there was no room left for him to train. He claimed that he was just killing time, but he seemed to be enjoying the older books like the wealthy merchant's diary. Apparently, he had always liked history.

As for me, I was taking it easy. That didn't mean I was just lazing around though. Since so many people were using the Unlimited Bath now, it was consuming boatloads of my MP. I was also spending MP in my dreams, so I tried to spend as much time as possible relaxing while I was awake.

Considering how it normally didn't feel so exhausting to maintain the Unlimited Bath, I felt like I was consuming more MP than I should have been. I figured interacting with the Goddess of Chaos must have been the primary cause. *Rakti says she can't explain this unusual MP drain to me "yet." I have no idea what she means by that...*

After a long voyage, we were now approaching a port in Neptune. The radar detected a row of unmoving objects beyond the ship holding Cosmos. Those were likely a bunch of docked ships—that

meant we were close.

“There sure are a lot of ships...” I noted.

What we gathered from the radar wasn't merely that we were closing in on Cosmos, however. There was an unusually high number of ships at port. It was normal to see several ships docked at a pier, but the quantity of ships here was excessive; the radar made it seem like Neptune's harbor was entirely covered by docked ships. We continued sailing with caution and neared the harbor.

The piers here were normally used by merchant ships. I looked toward the coast, wondering if there was a festival or something going on. What I saw instead was a line of identical ships all docked along the piers. There were a lot of people too.

Cosmos's ship had already arrived. It was docked between the other ships, but it conspicuously towered above everything around it.

I looked around, searching for a place to dock, and Clena murmured from beside me as she peered toward the harbor. “Hey, aren't all those lined-up ships...warships?”

We called Achilles over to get his assessment, and he said that they were almost all warships from Jupiter. *This is Neptune, so why are Jupiter's warships here?*

As we drew closer to the harbor, we saw soldiers gathered along the piers. There weren't many of them compared to the number of ships. *Maybe this is just a fraction of them. Perhaps the rest are in the city.*

If we make land here, the soldiers will notice us immediately. We should go somewhere else.

We quietly redirected the Grande Nautilus to the dock of its maker, the crystal mage Rondalan. This area was primarily used by fishermen, so there were no warships or soldiers in sight. Fortunately, there were no fishing boats around the dock right now either. We could make land here without getting noticed.

In any case, what's going on? We came to rescue Cosmos, but it seems like there's more in store for us now. Something's afoot. Unable to get that hunch off my mind, I steered the Grande Nautilus toward the pier.

First Bath — Déjà Vu in the Bath's Shadows

We managed to dock at the fishermen's pier without being noticed by the warships and soldiers. I wanted to get out and find Rondalan immediately, but I couldn't disembark since I'd have to let everyone out of the Unlimited Bath first and close its door. Instead, I entrusted Brahms and Mem with a letter and a covert mission. Those two wouldn't be noticed so easily.

I walked to the deck of the ship, which was about the limit of where I could move, and gazed at the town built from light-blue stone. I wished I was here for leisure, but there was no use grumbling about that now.

"Ooh! Ye bunch are back!" I turned to the direction of the voice to see Rondalan bounding toward us, his hair as explosive as usual.

Glad to see he's in high spirits...

"Keep your voice down." ...*but I need him to stop shouting. I don't want the soldiers to find us.*

"Oh, my bad. I heard the story from those two. Seems like y'all are in a bind, eh?"

"I could say the same for this city. What's going on?"

"Ahh, 'bout that... A hero's come to the city."

"...What?" *Haruno, Kannami, and I are here. He shouldn't be talking about Cosmos, who was just kidnapped... Maybe Ritsu Nakahana, who should have returned to Jupiter?* "And what about those warships?"

"Hell if I know. Seems like they're staying here for the time being." Rondalan didn't seem to know too much about the situation.

Princess Franchellis came to us with Ricott in tow. Some vitality must have returned to her now that we'd landed in Neptune; you could feel her strength in her expression again. "Someone in Ritsu's party might be behind this. Since there are so many troops here, it is possible that they have sneaked some of their own in. My brother would do something like that."

Is that how you view your own brother, Princess? "I'm thinking Nakahana could be pulling the strings too."

"I would not deny that, and there is also the possibility that those two are cooperating."

We can't make any more deductions with the information we have now. No helping it.

“In any case, Sir Touya, you should prepare to set sail again at any moment. We will go into the city with Sir Natsuki’s party and search for Sir Cosmos.”

“There are soldiers all over the place. Will you be okay?”

“We will conceal our presence as much as possible, but please prepare to escape if the time comes.”

“Are y’all planning to ransack this city or somethin’?” Rondalan interjected—little did he know we were the ones who had been ransacked. The princess was right, though: we did need to make plans to escape.

“In that case, we need to replenish our food supply as quickly as possible.”

“Please do. I will leave half of my guards here. You may use them as necessary.”

“I can’t move from here, so that’ll help. Thank you.” *Okay, we have our plan. Now it’s time to get started.*

Rondalan said that he was hoping to bring the Grande Nautilus to shore to give it a checkup, but unfortunately, we wouldn’t have time for that. He’d heard the full story about Cosmos’s kidnapping now, so he understood the situation and didn’t push the subject. He said he’d do any checks he could on board, so he took Pardoe and the other ketolts with him to grab tools.

Haruno and Clena split into two groups to replenish our supplies. We assumed the streets were teeming with soldiers, so I had them dress as inconspicuous as possible. Apparently, Brahms and Mem each had a keen sense of their surroundings, so I had one of them join each group.

The ones remaining were Rulitora, Prae, and I. Those two would have stood out too much in the city, so I had them stand guard here. We were resting and keeping watch on the deck of the ship now. The Unlimited Bath would have made for a better resting spot, but there was a reason why we’d come to this dock.

After some time, our surroundings got a little noisy. Fishermen were gathering outside. I recognized some of their faces; they must have come here after noticing the Grande Nautilus.

“You’re back, young lad!” exclaimed a lady in a floral dress. She was the wife of a fisherman who had often given us fresh fish while we were staying here waiting for the Grande Nautilus to be completed. I remembered most of the others here—they were all fishermen or their family members. Indeed, I had stayed on deck to meet with these people.

Prae, seeing so many unfamiliar faces, curled up and hid behind me. The bunch cooed at the sight of her clinging to me while I asked them what was happening in this city.

“There was only one of those ships at first.”

“But then they wouldn’t stop coming. Did you see that other pier?”

“Yeah, there’s a crazy number of them.”

“They at least won’t come all the way out here, but I heard they rented out the entirety of the Maiden of the Roaring Waves and are throwing parties. What are they here for?”

To sightsee? No, that wouldn’t explain why so many ships arrived later.

Rondalan’s group returned while we were talking. They started performing checks on the ship’s interior, so I asked Crissa, who wasn’t participating, to prepare some snacks for us. I treated the fishermen to the food and asked them for more information.

“How did the soldiers on those ships look?”

“They’re all on edge for some reason. They even act like that at the bars at night—makes it so difficult to go there!” one of the older fishermen replied, frustrated at one of his nightly joys being robbed.

The soldiers wouldn’t have been that nervous about protecting Ritsu Nakahana alone, especially with that many of them. There must have been something else they were aiming for. Just *what* that was exactly was the question, but unsurprisingly, no one knew.

I tried getting more information from them, but that was about all I could dig out. In summary, it was likely that Nakahana’s troops were only a fraction of those soldiers, and the rest belonged to another force. We didn’t know the details, but the soldiers had some goal that was causing them to be nervous. There must have been some reason why the situation hadn’t developed past that point, but I couldn’t guess why. Were they waiting for Cosmos to arrive after being kidnapped? There were so many unknowns, but now that we’d gotten a starting point, we could start investigating for real.

With the investigating out of the way, I switched tracks to idle chatter with our guests. The fishermen said that more people had been sailing to the island of gillmen lately. Most of them were older fishermen who wanted to pay a visit to the water altar since they were followers of the Goddess of Water when they were young, but there were also some who went to pray for a great haul before they went out to sea. They seemed to be getting along well with the gillmen on the island, which was a relief to hear.

The carriage I had donated to the light temple was currently being enshrined at the temple itself, so the people who lived near this port had never seen it. The horse was supposed to be at a nearby pasture—I wondered if it was still doing well. I wanted to pay it a visit, but that would have been difficult without having figured out our current issues.

“Oh my, if it isn’t Clena!”

We heard some voices coming from outside. Clena’s group had returned from shopping. They had bought a ton, as indicated by Brahms drawing a wagon that they must have borrowed. It would be a project to get all that inside.

“Rulitora, Prae.”

“We will bring the cargo inside.”

“Leave it to us! ♪”

I couldn’t move from here due to the Unlimited Bath, so I entrusted the task to those two. They lifted the stacks of wooden boxes without breaking a sweat and carried them inside.

“Hm? Wasn’t Rakti with you all?” I asked.

“This is the first time Haruno’s group has come to this city, so she and Rium joined them,” Clena replied.

I see, as tour guides. Rakti and Rium were familiar with this city, so there was no need to worry about them.

I was about to ask Clena about her trip, but then I heard voices from outside again.

“Oh, if it isn’t Rakti too!”

“That young lady is a new face. Is she yours too, young lad?”

Haruno’s group had come back too. *What do you mean, “yours?” Well, I guess I know what she means.*

“O-Oh no, Touya and I still have a pure relationship...” Haruno acted embarrassed, but she was the type to run her mouth if I left her to her own devices. I had no idea what the fishermen’s wives might get up to if she kept talking, so I quickly called her over here.

From what info I gathered about everyone’s shopping trips, the soldiers really did seem on edge. The residents didn’t seem to think too highly of them, and there were rumors that the soldiers were planning to invade somewhere. The island of gillmen was too small for an army of that size, and the water capital was obviously out of their reach...

“So that leaves...Ares?” Haruno concluded.

“That’s the likely answer,” Clena agreed.

This was too soon after anyone would have learned of the demon lord’s revival, so I doubted it was directly related. However, Ares didn’t have a light temple, so it wasn’t out of the question for an invasion. *This is bad. I should discuss this with Princess Franchellis first.*

The princess’s party came back early in the evening, and Kannami’s party returned shortly after that. The fishermen had left at that point, so we went inside the Unlimited Bath to talk.

On a side note, Rondalan was still checking the ship. I guess he was staying here for the night.

The two parties had found out that Cosmos was being kept in the Maiden of the Roaring Waves inn, but there were too many soldiers around, so they hadn't been able to rescue him. Also, it turned out that Nakahana was staying at the same inn. She was almost definitely behind the kidnapping at this point.

"Why would she do something like that?" I asked.

"We were not about to figure that out..." Princess Franchellis admitted. "I would assume that if she is cooperating with my brother, then they want him as a military asset."

But they already have Nakahana... I guess having two or three heroes on your side would be advantageous. There are three heroes right here, after all.

On Kannami's end, they had made use of Achilles's former general status to pry information out of the soldiers. It seemed like the soldiers didn't know that Kannami's party was traveling with us, so they got the soldiers to talk without much resistance.

"Come to think of it, were you okay having the Beast King with you?"

"No problem. Word has already gone around that I made him part of my party."

"If only I could make use of my position too!" The princess seemed jealous. She and her party had gone in disguise and investigated under cover. That couldn't be helped, though: if the other side found out that the princess was here, it'd have been obvious to them that she had come to take back Cosmos.

Anyway, since Kannami's party was able to talk directly with the soldiers, they had found out their goal.

"They're an expeditionary force to invade Ares."

"Ah, our guess was right. The fishermen said that the soldiers seemed nervous, and there were rumors that they were planning to invade somewhere."

"...Is this true?" The princess zoned in on this topic. She started murmuring, thinking to herself...

"We shall sink every last ship at that port." ...before saying something rather disturbing.

"Is that something the princess of Jupiter's sacred family should say?" I asked.

"It may be slightly problematic as a member of the sacred family, but as the princess of Jupiter, I do not believe I am in the wrong."

"Oh ho, so does Your Highness think the expeditionary force will lose against Ares?" Achilles asked.

"Yes. You can foresee it too, can you not, Achilles?" The princess swiftly shut down his line of questioning. He didn't seem too pleased, but he didn't prod any further, which I guessed meant that he didn't

think the princess was wrong.

Haruno and Clena met each other's eyes. "This could develop into a repeat of five hundred years ago," Haruno noted.

"Indeed... Grandfather wouldn't stay quiet about this," Clena agreed.

They were right. The battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord five hundred years ago was said to have been instigated from Jupiter's side, and it seemed like it might happen again. After all, the resurrected demon lord was in Ares right now. The demon lord had said that he had no intent to start another war, but if he were to be attacked, then he would of course fight back. The princess may have been including the demon lord in her calculations when she said that Jupiter wouldn't win.

"If the warships are lost, then the expeditionary forces will not be able to advance from here. If we only sink the warships, there will be minimal damage to the soldiers themselves. This is the most cordial action we can take with our current options."

"I'll ask just in case, but can't you order the expeditionary forces to stop?"

"Those forces are moving under my brother's orders, and I do not have the authority to order anyone other than my own guards."

So, that's why she came to the conclusion to sink the ships. It was pretty heavy-handed, but I could see why she would have to go that far to stop the expeditionary forces. If doing that could avoid another war with the demon lord, I couldn't have even imagined how many potential casualties we would be preventing.

I see... It's a problem for her to overlook the demon lord as a princess of the sacred family, but as the princess of Jupiter, she's in the right for protecting the lives of the soldiers—Jupiter's citizens.

"In that case, I'll assist," I declared. *This might be a betrayal of Jupiter, but if we let them be, a war would start between Jupiter and Ares. The demon lord won't just sit there if that happens. We have to do something to stop the expeditionary forces here to keep him in check as well. If it were just my party, I might have hesitated, but we have Princess Franchellis on our side. As long as she's here, we shouldn't be painted as the bad guys.*

Also, the one who can sink the ships with the least damage is probably me. Conclusion: we have no choice.

"Is there a time when all the soldiers leave the ships?" Haruno asked.

"Most of them are gone in the evening. The only ones who stay are the guards on watch. Some of them return later at night, but most of them are staying in the city," Achilles responded.

That must be when the soldiers leave the port for the bars and cross

paths with the fishermen. So they would have already left the ships for the day by now... I wanted to make our move as soon as we'd finished preparations, but would we make it if we started now?

"If we start preparing now...would we make it in time?" I asked.

"Don't get ahead of yourself. Ya need more wiggle room before gettin' into these things. Don't worry, the warships won't go anywhere today or tomorrow. If they will, we woulda seen more movement in the daytime."

"So, we should finish our preparations by noon tomorrow..." I replied.

"We want to stock up on a few more things, so let's plan for that," Clena agreed.

"Oh yeah, why don't we take advantage of the commotion while the ships are being sunk to rescue Cosmos?" I suggested.

"We can probably rescue him, but what about our own escape?" Haruno asked.

"About that..." I started to explain the plan I had thought up to destroy the warships. With this plan, we could reconvene with the princess after sinking the ships and then make our escape. The question was where to go after that. We had finished stocking up on food, so we had options: we could go to the gillmen's island, we could go to the island with the flower dragon, or we could even return to Ares.

Earlier, when I had gone to ask Rondalan when he'd be done with his checkups, I got some interesting information.

"I need to check the bottom of the ship, but we'd be noticed if we move it out of the dock right now," Rondalan said. "For that, I want ya to move it to my secret lab outside of town."

"Tell me more," I replied.

There was an inlet west of town, and in there was a cave that Rondalan used for his experiments. There was even a dock built there—or rather, there was a dock Rondalan had built himself.

"The neighbors kept complaining about all the explosions, y'know," he lamented.

"So, you went out of town... Is there a lot of space there?"

"Ye, plenty."

That sounded like a good place to take a breather after we'd made our escape.

Later, I explained to him our plan to sink Jupiter's warships, rescue Cosmos, and make our escape, and he offered to tag along and take the ship there to inspect the bottom.

"It might be dangerous," I informed him.

"It'd be just as dangerous to stay in the city after you lot stir up

that much trouble.”

That’s true... Maybe we wouldn’t have to worry about the fishermen, but as the creator of the Grande Nautilus, Rondalan might be deemed to be one of our conspirators.

“That place is the perfect spot to hide yourself as ya wait for things to cool off.”

“You sound like you know from experience.”

“Well, ya know how it is! Wa ha ha ha!”

I could guess why he’d gone all the way over there to build a dock now.

So, I told everyone about Rondalan’s secret lab, and the princess agreed to use that as a hiding spot after we’d made our escape. It was officially part of our plans for tomorrow.

I undocked the Grande Nautilus and steered it from under the sea toward the port where all the warships were anchored, and then I surveyed the area. There were plenty of soldiers walking around the port, not to mention on the ships themselves. According to Achilles, a bunch of soldiers walking around town aimlessly in a foreign country would provoke the residents, so they had to keep to themselves most of the time.

“The fishermen said the soldiers seemed on edge inside the bars, and they didn’t seem to like the soldiers much.”

“Can’t blame them. Alcohol and food are one of the fishermen’s few pleasures...”

I could see where they were coming from, though I couldn’t sympathize.

I changed course to the Maiden of the Roaring Waves inn, where I would discreetly drop off the princess and her group. They would rescue Cosmos while I caused an uproar at the port. After that, we would pick the princess back up and make haste to Rondalan’s secret lab.

I made my way to the Maiden of the Roaring Waves inn, on the side where the rock baths joined the sea. Of course, we couldn’t drop them off right at the baths, so I stopped the ship a distance away. The princess’s group disembarked, and then I returned the Grande Nautilus to the port while remaining hidden underwater.

We didn’t see any movement until after sunset. The soldiers gradually disembarked the ships and went to town. Only those on watch remained. We’d begin our plan around when the soldiers might start drinking.

“Okay, it’s game time, Rium.” She nodded in response and grounded the Grande Nautilus to the seafloor.

“And, and?! What are ya gonna do?! Shoot silver spears at the ship bottoms?!” Rondalan seemed like he was having fun. Those spears turned into dust after being shot, so it’s true that we could flood the ships all at once like that...but that wasn’t our plan. I wanted to concentrate, so I gave a look to Rulitora, who promptly shut Rondalan’s mouth to keep him quiet.

“Okay, here we go!” I channeled MP through the magic crystal at the bottom of the ship, which was in contact with the seafloor. The spell I used was “summon spirit” of earth magic.

Several sharp protrusions emerged from the seabed and surrounded the ships to trap them. After I made sure the ships’ bodies were stuck in place, I directed the pointed ends to pierce the ship bottoms.

It would take a while for the soldiers on board to figure out what was going on. To make sure they couldn’t repair the ships quickly, I stabbed several sharp points through each ship. Since we were inside a ship at the bottom of the sea, I couldn’t hear anything, but I imagined there must have been cries from on board right now. The ships were now flooding, but thanks to the rocks trapping them, they remained above water. They were basically sitting ducks.

According to Achilles, the soldiers that remained during dinner hours were either the guards stationed on deck for watch duty or their commanders in a stateroom above, so there shouldn’t be any casualties even after all this.

“The soldiers should be coming back by now,” Yukina noted.

Just as she said, soldiers had started rushing back after learning of the situation. But it was too late—the bottoms of the ships were already skewered by rocks. There was nothing more that they could do.

“Touya, that’s the last one!” Haruno informed me.

And that was that; I stopped channeling magic at Haruno’s cue. *That was a massive MP burn...* It hadn’t affected me while I was in the zone, but I suddenly started panting.

Their fleet was in shambles now. It wouldn’t sink them, but they had no hope of moving those ships, much less repairing them. We’d managed to prevent their expedition to Ares. Now we needed to escape before anyone with a sharp eye noticed us.

“Rium,” I said. She nodded and directed the Grande Nautilus to the Maiden of the Roaring Waves inn.

We docked the ship at the same place we had dropped the princess off at and waited for their return. The lights inside the Maiden of the Roaring Waves lit up the night sky, but we were behind the shadows of the walls of the rock baths, so it would be difficult to spot us. I opened the dome and heard some yells. *Sounds like they*

weren't able to rescue Cosmos so covertly.

"Seems like they could use some reinforcement. Roni, Brahms, Mem, can you handle this?" Clena commanded.

"Understood." Roni answered her order without missing a beat. Brahms and Mem both nodded a moment later.

Roni was familiar with the inner layout of the Maiden of the Roaring Waves, while Brahms and Mem were ninja who had been employed by the Dark Prince, meaning they were professionals at covert operations. Those three were the best fit to be reinforcements here.

"Rulitora, disembark and stand by," I ordered. "If the princess's group is chased down here, aid them in their escape."

"Sandra, Rin, Lumis, Prae, please go too," Haruno also ordered.

Between the two of us, we'd sent out five lookouts. Mark, wielding a hammer, also joined them, saying that he could lend a hand while the Grande Nautilus wasn't moving.

"Haruno and Clena, I'll leave this area to you. I'll go to the indoor open-air bath and check out the situation inside."

I'll scout out the building from the indoor open-air bath. Yukina and Daisy were in charge of relaying communication, and I ordered the rest to stand by on deck.

The first place I checked out from the open-air bath was the room the princess had stayed in. That was the VIP room, so if Nakahana was staying at the inn, she must have been in that room too.

"Whoa, what happened here?" Yukina let out a gasp. The room that displayed on screen no longer had a trace of the glamour it had been decorated with. The floors and walls were covered in scrapes. No one was here now, but a battle had clearly taken place.

"Hm...?" Looking more closely, I saw small holes littering the walls among the scrapes. *Are those bullet holes? That might be Cosmos's gift, Unlimited Bullet. So he had been part of the fight here... Hopefully that's a sign that he was able to get out safely.*

I changed locations on the display, looking around for Cosmos. I switched to the hallways, where there were a few soldiers hastily running around. I figured he wouldn't escape above, so I went down one floor at a time, scanning the hallways. Then I found Cosmos in a hallway on the second floor in the midst of battle.

"...Huh?" However, the people he was fighting were the princess's party.

"Wh-What's that myan think he's doing?!" Crissa cried out and clung to Rakti beside her.

I couldn't believe it either—the one and only Cosmos was pointing a gun at the princess.

Kannami and the Beast King were battling in front while Achilles

was shielding the princess behind him. The Beast King parried Cosmos's attacks, and in the meantime, Kannami found an opening to strike. Cosmos was countering them with dual handguns, but...something was off.

"Aren't his movements pretty dull?" Rakti was right; he was moving strangely. There were none of his usual overpolished and overflourished moves on display. Perhaps that made him stronger, since it looked like Kannami and the rest were having a rough time.

"Oh, Roni's here," Daisy noted.

I looked toward the end of the hallway at Daisy's words. Roni was about to aim for a surprise attack at Cosmos's neck from behind him. Her sneak attack succeeded, but Cosmos still wasn't going down. He turned around and pointed a gun at Roni, but then he abruptly stopped his movements. He grabbed his head and started squirming.

"What's he doing...?" Rakti tilted her head watching him.

Daisy smirked. "It's Cosmos, so maybe he's agonizing about not being able to attack women?"

"Oh, that makes sense..." I couldn't tell what anyone in the hallway was saying from this display, but I thought her guess was spot-on.

Kannami wasn't one to let this chance go. He grabbed Cosmos from behind, pinning his arms from the shoulders and attempting to stop him in place. Cosmos didn't hold back against other men, so he pointed his guns at Kannami instead, but Roni was one step ahead and knocked both guns out of Cosmos's hands. The guns dispersed into thin air before they hit the ground. However, two new guns appeared in his hands right afterward. *I suppose that's another power of the Unlimited Bullet.* All the while, Kannami dodged the barrels of the guns by twisting his body around while keeping Cosmos locked down. They were at a stalemate.

That was when Foley came forward and cast some sort of spell. A white mist appeared near Cosmos's face, then he lost strength and collapsed in Kannami's arms. Kannami almost lost balance holding Cosmos in place, but he recovered. They seem to have put Cosmos to sleep with a spell. They had no way to stop him other than making him lose consciousness.

They tied Cosmos's hands behind his back using a sheet from a nearby room. The Beast King shouldered him up, and the party began moving out. *It should be a nonstop route for them out of the Maiden of the Roaring Waves from here.*

I stopped the transmission and returned to the deck right when the princess's party returned. Cosmos hadn't woken up yet, and Rulitora was now carrying him.

"Hurry," Achilles urged us. "We don't know where Nakahana ran

off to thanks to this guy causing a ruckus.”

“She might return at any moment with more troops,” I added. *Nakahana wasn’t in that room, so maybe she had gone off to call for reinforcements.*

As soon as everyone reembarked the Grande Nautilus, I closed the dome and lowered the ship into the water. Our destination was Rondalan’s secret lab. We would hide ourselves there and figure out what was going on.

We tried relying on Rondalan for directions, but it was hard to tell where we were supposed to be headed from the bottom of the sea. Instead, he pointed out where the secret lab was on a map, and we used that as a guide to make our way there.

“It’s pretty far, huh...” I said.

“The sounds would reach the city if it were too close...” Rium pointed out.

Come to think of it, her master Nartha lives in a mansion in the outskirts of Athenapolis. I decided to point this out.

“But her mansion wasn’t *this* far out, was it?” Haruno asked, which made Rium avert her eyes.

“Her experiments were rather extreme...”

“I see...”

I guess there were others like Rondalan out there...

As we talked, the Grande Nautilus approached a shoreline with a cliff towering over it. We were far enough from Neptunopolis now, so I brought the ship to the surface of the water and looked around.

The land above that cliff is the void, huh. Comparing our current location to the map, the secret lab was on the other side of the cape that we were facing. We circled around the cape, and on the other side we found a huge cave opening under the cliff that reminded me of the port of Ares.

I steered the Grande Nautilus inside the cave to find several partially destroyed buildings within. A wall of one of the buildings had entirely crumbled apart, and fabric had been put up in its place.

We approached a simple pier, which looked newer than the buildings. Rondalan had probably done both the building and the destroying here. We docked the ship and disembarked.

The cave itself wasn’t as big as the port of Ares—maybe about half to two-thirds of its size. The ceiling was more than tall enough for Prae to stand up and move around under, though it was still lower than the one in Ares.

Most of the buildings barely retained their original shapes. There were four buildings that looked usable, including one large one that seemed to have had its entire roof blown off.

“Can you take out everything we need to camp out for the night?”

I asked everyone. "Sorry, but I want to rest tonight without using MP."

"You really did a number back there," Clena said. She was right; I had exhausted a huge amount of MP in that massive attack. It was already late since we had taken time to get here, so everyone agreed to wait until tomorrow morning to take a bath.

Everyone outside of my party was used to camping outside during their travels, so they already had all the equipment they needed in place. The princess's party brought their own tent, and the imperial guards claimed an open spot and started pitching it with ease.

On that note, Cosmos had yet to return to his senses and was still tied up. The princess's party had him surrounded, and I guessed he had woken up since I was hearing a lot of noise.

"Gaaaah!!! Aaargghh!!!"

"What's up with him?" I went up to them to find Cosmos with a gag in his mouth.

"Sir Cosmos hasn't returned to normal yet, and he was yelling offensive remarks at us just now..." Ricott explained that they had taken Cosmos to this room to rest, but he had resisted them while he was still tied up. He had shouted insults at the princess and her party.

According to their descriptions, though, the insults sounded like things Cosmos himself would have thought up, since they were on the level of an elementary schooler trying to make fun of someone. But it had still made Balsamina mad, and now Foley was trying to calm her down.

Meanwhile, Princess Franchellis seemed to have gone into a depressive shock. *She has surprisingly little immunity against these things, huh... Or maybe the bluntness of his elementary-school-level insults is exactly what makes his words so destructive.*

Besides that, he had been singing Nakahana's praises with an entranced look on his face. They couldn't stand listening to his ramblings and didn't want the princess to hear them either, so that's when they decided to shut up Cosmos by gagging him.

I never would have expected Cosmos to throw that many insults against women though, even if his jabs were juvenile. He really did seem to have lost his mind. *Is this brainwashing of some sort? That would explain why he was praising Nakahana so much.*

Okay, time to investigate. The first thing that came to mind was the first time we'd encountered Goldfish—the Masked Cleric, one of the demon generals. He had said he'd brainwash anyone who drank the spring water, but did he mean he would cast some sort of spell?

I shared my thoughts with Sera, Rium, and Rakti, who were passing by. I wanted to get Clena's and Haruno's thoughts on the matter too, but the two of them were busy setting up for the night, so I decided I shouldn't bother them.

“Can you use a spell to do something like this?” I asked.

“You’d never be able to do something like that with light cleric magic!” Sera insisted, waving her hands. She seemed frantic to deny it, since a spell that would put Cosmos in this state would be no good.

“You can’t make any tools that could do that with crystal magic,” Rium explained.

“Not even Rondalan?” I asked.

“Not even Rondalan,” Rium responded without hesitation. Crystal magic wasn’t geared toward affecting a person’s mental state.

“I’ve never created any spells that would do this either,” Rakti added. Even she wasn’t aware of magic like this. “But I don’t know everything, so...”

Cleric magic comprised the spells that the goddesses made and the spells that clerics made. The spell that Goldfish knew was probably something that he’d created himself as a cleric.

“Okay, I’ll ask someone who probably knows.” I returned to the Unlimited Bath and “brought out” the expert.

I picked up a wrapped towel. More specifically, this wasn’t a towel, but a curse-repelling mantle.

“Give me back my body!” I unwrapped the mantle only to be met with a shrieking voice. Within it was a talking, jaw-rattling skull. This was Phoenix, one of the former demon generals of the demon lord’s army.

I couldn’t close the door to the Unlimited Bath if anything living was still inside, so this was a good opportunity to take him out.

“Shut up and let me ask you a question.” I pressed down between the top and bottom of the skull, made him face Cosmos, and explained our situation.

“If there were a spell like that, I’d have used it already,” Phoenix spat out immediately after I’d finished talking.

If Goldfish could use a spell like that, it was possible that it was something he had developed himself and then hidden the existence of. But that didn’t explain how Nakahana had brainwashed Cosmos. It didn’t seem likely that Goldfish would have shared that spell with someone who then joined Nakahana’s party, so...

“If it’s not a spell, it’s obvious what it actually is,” Phoenix concluded.

“Her gift...” A “gift” was the power that we summoned heroes were granted. It allowed us to perform deeds that not even magic could pull off.

“But I can’t believe that a gift from Sister Light would take a form like that...” Rakti said.

I had the same thought, which was why I had suspected a spell at first. But if this wasn’t magic, then the only possibility remaining was

a gift. Just like how my Unlimited Bath had practically grown into a hot spring resort, her gift could have shifted away from its original intended usage, so we couldn't jump to conclusions.

Well, if that's the case, the solution is simple. Nakahana's gift is likely activated using MP like the Unlimited Bath. That means it can be repelled using Haruno's Unlimited Reflection.

"Hey, Haruno!" I called her over and asked her to use her Unlimited Reflection on Cosmos, who was still grumbling under his gag. He promptly turned silent and blinked his eyes several times.

We removed his gag, and he started asking "Who am I? Where is this?" as he looked around him, apparently confused about his current situation. *Okay, this is the normal Cosmos. I'm sure the princess will be both relieved and more tired to see him again.*

It didn't sound like he had retained any of his memories while brainwashed, but I would leave any communication about that to the princess.

I delivered Cosmos to the imperial guards, who had just finished setting up their tent. They bowed at me several times before bringing him inside. For some reason, his hands remained tied, but I assumed they would untie him soon. Probably.

"All right, let's get going," Haruno said. Clena's group had finished setting up for the night in the meantime, so it was time to join them and rest.

I was about to wrap Phoenix up in the curse-repelling mantle again when he spoke to me in a surprisingly calm voice.

"I was wondering why this place looked familiar... You did well finding it."

"Oh? Have you been here before?"

I put off wrapping him up again and showed him around the cave. "Hmm. Yes, there's no doubt," he said while rolling back and forth in my hands. It felt like he was trying to nod. "There's hardly a trace of it left anymore, but this was Hades's port...or well, it was planned to be."

"What?" *This was Hades's...? Well, the void is right above us, so I guess I shouldn't be too surprised.*

"But the Beast King didn't seem to recognize this place," Haruno pointed out. He had been transporting luggage with Kannami earlier, but he didn't react any differently from the rest of us.

"Well, don't ya figure it's because Hades was destroyed before it was finished being built?" Phoenix replied. "He would only know what it looked like before construction."

"I-I see..."

In other words, Phoenix had a hand in building this port? Maybe he's actually competent with jobs outside of war-related ones.

Come to think of it, we traveled through an underground tunnel going east to west to go from Ceres to Hades, then to Hephaestus. It wouldn't be strange for there to be a similar tunnel going from north to south. In that case, there might be an entrance to that tunnel somewhere here. Let's rest for tonight and try looking for it tomorrow.

I had a dream different from usual that night.

I was in a pitch-black space. This was another dream with the goddess sisters, but they all looked tense and had rigid posture. This had happened once before.

The Goddesses of Light, Fire, and Wind were to my right, and the Goddesses of Darkness, Earth, and Water were to my left. There was a path that extended before me, and beyond that was...

"I thought that it would take more time than this, but my, you overexerted yourself..."

It was my first time hearing this voice, yet it felt familiar.

The owner of the voice had hair a brighter gold than the Goddess of Light's, and it fluttered behind her as she approached me. Looking closer, the hair gave off a soft glow, casting a light on her figure in the darkness.

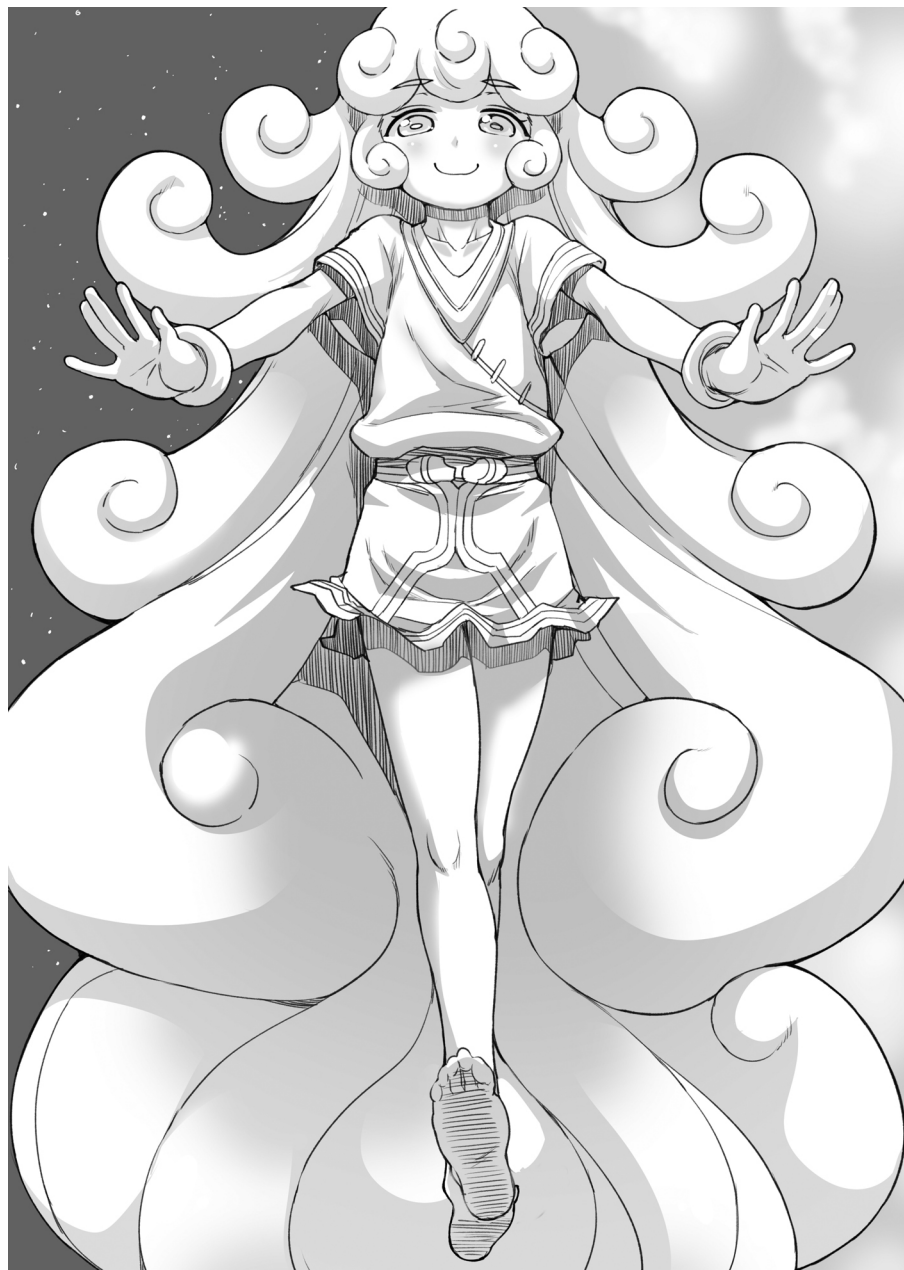
She slowly walked down the path past each of the goddesses, then stopped before me.

"You've worked hard, my dear child." She extended her arm and patted her *small* hand on my head.

My eyes angled downward as my head was being patted. I saw the tips of her small toes floating off the ground, and her hair extended even past that. Her lustrous and poofy hair swirled down like a golden waterfall.

I raised my line of sight to look at her. She was small. Even smaller than I was expecting.

Indeed, the girl before me, who appeared to be even younger than Rakti, was the mother of the six goddess sisters—the goddess who governed this world, the Goddess of Chaos.



I tried to answer her, but no words left my throat. I knew outer appearance meant little to the goddesses, but to think the mother of the goddess sisters looked like this...

"The world is still immature." As if she had read my mind, the Goddess of Chaos answered me and smiled.

Her smile was filled with an all-encompassing affection, and that's when I realized. Rakti had a childish side that fit her appearance, but *she* was different. My back had already straightened unconsciously.

As soon as I raised my head, our surroundings transformed from an empty black into a magnificent palace. It was a strange sight.

Behind the Goddess of Chaos was a round painting that extended from the floor to nearly as high as the ceiling. It wasn't any normal painting, though; it was moving. I noticed that the moving objects were clouds, and then I realized that it was a screen that projected the world. Pillars separated the left and right sides of the image, but interestingly, the right side showed a bright blue sky, while the left showed a starry night sky. I looked above and behind the picture out of curiosity, but there was only the ceiling and wall. There was a similar round picture on the reverse side of the first that depicted another night sky, but this one seemed farther away, as if someone was looking up from the ground.

The ceiling was decorated in a pattern I couldn't grasp the meaning of. Inspecting it more closely, it seemed to form a line that connected the two paintings.

So, this is the sanctuary of the Goddess of Chaos... Honestly, I couldn't wrap my head around it; it didn't feel real. Despite that, the presence of the tiny goddess before me put me at ease.

I suddenly realized one more thing while looking around. Or rather, I remembered, even though I had no memory of it—perhaps that's a weird way of phrasing it, but it was the most accurate description. This wasn't the first time I had come here. I had been here time and time again in my dreams.

Now I could finally retain my memory of the Goddess of Chaos. I had grown that far. The final catalyst was probably the massive amount of magic I had used at Neptune.

I kept glancing around until the Goddess of Light came up to me and grabbed my head from both sides.

"Dear brother, I do wish to celebrate you making your way to this sanctuary, but there is something we must talk about first. It is regarding Ritsu Nakahana's gift."

She'd brought up exactly what I had been wanting to ask. Or maybe she had read my mind.

"Just like yours, the gift I granted her was not meant for battle.

But it is also not meant for brainwashing, as you are thinking.”

“I figured as much. But then what is it?”

“Her gift is one which embodies the dual aspects of ‘guidance’...”

“Guidance...? As in, to teach and to lead?”

“Precisely. She herself can also be taught and led. I granted her this gift so that she may grow stronger and survive in this world.”

The Goddess of Light explained that Nakahana was the weakest of the five of us, and she had granted Nakahana that gift out of worry for her. Thinking about it, us three guys were getting along just fine, and Haruno was tougher than she looked.

Her gift was the ability to lead people into dreams and conduct sleep-learning for everyone within, including herself. The power to learn and grow even in your sleep... I’d come to know exactly how convenient that was thanks to learning magic from the goddesses in my dreams.

The limitation of the gift was that you could only gain knowledge or skills that others in the dream already possessed; however, you could learn from anyone participating, not just Nakahana herself.

I see... So, that’s why she worked to gather people in Ceres and was practically leading an army by the time she’d returned to Jupiter. If your gift makes your allies stronger, then of course you should increase your number of allies—especially if you can absorb your allies’ knowledge and skills through sleep-learning.

“The name of her gift is Unlimited Love. I cannot say that it is an accurate name, but it is true to her subconscious. And as for her way of using it...”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you noticed? What she has taught to her allies is love...love for herself.”

So that’s what she’s been teaching and leading people to do...

“In fact, that is primarily what she is using it for.”

“That *would* be an efficient way to get a large number of people on your side...”

In Cosmos’s case, he had lost his senses for several days after just one night of hypnosis. If her gift had evolved, he could have been exposed to it for an even longer amount of time. It was no wonder how he had gotten like that now.

“Aren’t dreams more the domain of the Goddess of Darkness, though?” I looked toward Rakti, who awkwardly averted her eyes.

“You all came to this world thanks to Sister Light’s hero summoning spell, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that you are most compatible with her,” the Goddess of Water answered in Rakti’s place, gliding toward us.

“So, Nakahana was compatible with the Goddess of Darkness?” I

asked.

“Yes...like how you are compatible with me,” the Goddess of Water replied.

I guess I was. Thinking about it, the Unlimited Bath was a gift that had close connections with the water element.

“My, my, don’t forget he is most compatible with me,” said the Goddess of Chaos, who floated between us.

If that’s the case, that might be the reason why I’m the only hero able to interact with her. Similar logic can probably also explain why Haruno was able to take over the Goddess of Wind’s powers. I looked toward the Goddess of Wind, who formed a big circle with her arms and smiled. *Looks like I’m right.*

Apparently, I’m not incompatible with any of the goddesses. If I were, then I wouldn’t have been able to gain all of their blessings. My compatibility levels don’t seem to have any effect in this realm though.

“That is because you are most compatible with me, of course,” said the Goddess of Chaos. So, being the most compatible with her meant that I was also compatible with all of the goddess sisters.

“There’s one more thing that I want to confirm with Nakahana’s gift. Is the prince of the sacred family also affected?” I asked.

“It’s not as bad as Akio Nishizawa, but he is indeed under a degree of influence.”

Nishizawa...? Oh yeah, that’s Cosmos.

So, the prince had been exposed to it too. “If her entire army is in the same state Cosmos was in...” *We’ll have no choice but to have Haruno dispel the gift from all of them. But that would put a large burden on her...*

“There is another solution. I am sure it will come to you when you wake up.”

When I wake up...? What does she mean?

“Think about it again after you wake.” The Goddess of Chaos cut my train of thought short as she passed by me, now upside down.

“Anyway, mother has something she’d like to ask as well.”

“What is that?”

“Why is my new son acting so distant?”

“Huh?”

“Oh, I was wondering about that too.” The Goddess of Fire voiced her agreement while I reacted in confusion.

“Maybe he’s just that upstanding. Sister Light can act like that too sometimes.” The Goddess of Earth defended me. “But he is our new little brother, so I want to be more friendly, like siblings should.” Then she went a bit beyond defending me...

I see—maybe I was acting too distant if they consider me a brother or son. But I’m just trying to be respectful because they’re, you know, deities.

I looked over at Rakti, the Goddess of Darkness, who seemed a little uncomfortable. She was the only one I'd been treating like actual family, though that was when we were awake. Maybe she was feeling self-conscious about that. If I was the one making her feel that way, then I needed to correct my behavior.

"I'll try, but I need time to get used to this, so I can't change immediately..." I said.

"So, you just need to get used to it? Let's start trying now!" The Goddess of Wind seemed right on board.

"That's right. We should reward you now for making it to this sanctuary," the Goddess of Light agreed.

The Goddess of Chaos twirled her body, and our surroundings changed yet again. This time, we were in a spacious room—a party hall lined with extravagant food.

"It's not often that all of my children are gathered together like this. Now then, let us enjoy." The mother goddess smiled. Her grin was genuine and befitting of her youthful appearance.

"Are you not eating?" Haruno asked.

"Oh, I'm not that hungry..." I replied.

Rakti and I couldn't eat a bite of breakfast the next morning. We had eaten too much in our dream—or should I say the goddess's sanctuary? Did eating there mean that we had eaten for real? In any case, the only thing I could get down that morning was apple juice.

I was about to leave early when Princess Franchellis came by with Cosmos in tow. Haruno drew closer to me when she saw them.

"Thanks to you all, Sir Cosmos has returned to us. Sir Touya, Lady Haruno, I offer my sincerest gratitude for your assistance in this matter." Princess Franchellis bowed deeply.

"I'm all back to normal thanks to you guys! I don't remember anything, but great job, you two!" Cosmos thanked us with his usual happy look.

I see. Haruno stopped eating and came toward me because she realized what the princess was here for.

"Thank you as well," Haruno replied. "Has anything seemed off about him since then?"

"Not at all. Thank you for worrying..."

Haruno could handle the conversation with the princess from here, so I figured I should hear more from Cosmos. "By the way, do you remember anything that they did to you?" I asked him.

"No, I don't think they did anything to me at all."

"They didn't? Did you meet Nakahana?"

"I saw her, but we didn't even talk. They moved me to a different room right afterward."

He said he was given a meal after that, so it didn't sound like she had trapped him in a dream as soon as they'd met. *Maybe she did something to him when they saw each other and it activated afterward when he slept.*

On another note, she'd apparently had five bodyguard-like figures close to her.

"Like the princess's imperial guards?" I asked.

"No, they were all men. And they looked a little older."

Cosmos described them as a singing and dancing idol group. I couldn't figure out how he'd judged that they could dance, but maybe he meant that they all seemed athletic.

"There was one strange thing," he continued. "I was supposed to have been trapped in that room the entire time, but it felt like they had taken me somewhere wide open. It was a pretty place."

"Somewhere like where we are now?"

"No, it was more like...not-Japan?" He further explained that it had the air of a European resort, but he couldn't narrow it down to a more specific country. Maybe it was something Nakahana had conjured up to suit her own likings.

Cosmos and I finished talking around the same time the princess and Haruno did, and the two said they would go to meet Kannami next. They probably wanted to say their thanks to his party as well.

Haruno had gone back to her meal, so I took Rakti's hand and left. We went a distance away from everyone else, inside one of the half-wrecked buildings. The others wouldn't be able to see us from there.

"Now then, Rakti...about what the Goddess of Light said."

"Yes... I suppose it's come to you already?"

I nodded. I had sneaked us here to talk about exactly that.

"This is real?"

"Yes, it's real." Rakti clenched her hands into fists. *Seriously? This is for real?*

Okay then, I should wait for everyone to finish breakfast and then ask them to bring out any luggage they need. Then I'll give them time to take a relaxing bath. That's how we should start off.

"How should I explain this to everyone...?"

I honestly wasn't sure if I should even tell them yet, but I couldn't hide it either. This was a subject I couldn't avoid...

Everyone finished taking their baths, and then I asked them to bring out enough provisions to last us a few days. They wondered why we needed so much, but I said I'd explain later. After we finished our work, I gathered everyone outside the Unlimited Bath and closed its door.

I'd prepared a table and chairs taken from the ruins and put them

together in a clearing within the cave, where everyone now sat down. Haruno, Cosmos, Kannami, and Yukina sat closest to me.

Phoenix's skull was placed on top of the table. When Rakti and I had checked in on him this morning, he was as quiet as he had been yesterday. You could tell he really was a high-ranking cleric of darkness, since he seemed to be paying respects in Rakti's presence. I'd continue keeping an eye on him, and if he seemed worth trusting, I'd consider returning the rest of his body to him.

Anyway, everyone had guessed by now that something was up, and they all waited for my words with stern expressions. I felt like a teacher at the podium, even though there wasn't a chalkboard behind me. I looked back at everyone, took a deep breath, and started speaking.

"So...I learned a new spell."

"That's it?" Kannami's voice was exasperated, like he'd just had the letdown of a lifetime.

"That's it, but the effects of the spell..." *It would be faster to show them.* "Okay, I'm about to use the new spell, but nobody move until I finish explaining it."

Cosmos and Kannami looked at each other in confusion at my warning.

A picture was worth a thousand words. I summoned a "gate" from the empty space behind me. It was larger and distinctly different from the door to the Unlimited Bath.

"Ohh...!"

"That's...!"

Cosmos and Kannami exclaimed in response to the sight.

"Is this cleric magic?! But it can't be...!"

"What in the world?! I've never seen this before!"

Then Sera and Phoenix gasped out loud in astonishment. Phoenix, who was squirming around on the table, could tell that this wasn't something from the six goddess sisters.

"Is this a torii?" Haruno asked.

She was right on the dot. Yes, the gate that had appeared behind me was a torii, a gate to a Japanese Shinto shrine.

"Though it's not red," I murmured when I turned to check it out behind me. I knew it would be a torii gate, but I hadn't known what color it would be.

The gate itself was a blueish gray. It had a dense feel to it, like it was made of metal. The nameplate on it read "Goddess of Chaos." It was written in kanji, not the alphabet of this world. The calligraphy letters were thick and indicated skilled penmanship. There was a large shimenawa rope hanging under it.

"Does this gate not have a door?" Clena asked. To the people of

this world, a gate without a door seemed meaningless. But she was misunderstanding; this gate was simply closed right now.

Well, seeing is believing. Time to open the door.

A vortex appeared under the shimenawa at the center of the torii gate, and it grew to about the height of a person.

“Wh-Whoa, what’s this...?!” Kannami rose to his feet, while Cosmos slid off his chair and fell to the floor. Haruno and Yukina looked at the vortex in shock.

It was no surprise that they reacted like that. After all, beyond the vortex was...a view of Japan, somewhere lined with skyscrapers.

“The new spell I learned is a cleric spell of the Goddess of Chaos, ‘dimensional gate.’ The effect, as you can see, is that I can summon a gate that connects to Japan.”

This is what I had gained from making it to the Goddess of Chaos’s sanctuary. According to Rakti, the Goddess of Chaos had continuously trained me on using this spell throughout the time I couldn’t retain my memories of her. Now that I could finally remember it, I could use this spell while awake as well.

“This is...Japan...?” Phoenix looked at the sight in astonishment. The Japan he knew was from the Sengoku period, so it was no wonder.

“Okay, stop there.” Rium tottered her way closer to me, perhaps too curious about what she was seeing, so I grabbed her to stop her in her tracks. Rondalan tried to leap inside, but Rulitora held him back.

“You said to not move until you finished explaining, so is there something bad about this?” Rondalan asked.

“Yeah, in a sense. As you can see, this gate connects us to Japan, but if we cross through it...we’ll lose the blessings of the goddesses.”

“What do you mean?”

“Basically...”

Strength was measured in this world by a combination of physical strength and the power of your blessings. It was thanks to blessings that people who came here from modern Japan could fight against monsters and even use magic. But these blessings were specifically “blessings granted to those living in this world.”

We were granted the blessing of the Goddess of Light when we were summoned to this world, but if we crossed this gate, the opposite would happen. In other words, if we returned to Japan, we would no longer be considered people “living in this world,” and we would lose our blessings. We would no longer be able to use our gifts.

On top of that, we were only able to communicate with the people of this world thanks to the blessing of the Goddess of Light, so we would no longer be able to understand each other without it.

I was the only exception; I wouldn’t lose my blessings if I returned

to Japan. I didn't know the exact reason, but apparently, my title of the "youngest brother of the goddess sisters" wasn't just for show.

I finished explaining for the time being and closed the vortex. Everyone was silent for a moment, but as what they had just witnessed caught up to them, they gradually started talking.

Some people started talking to those next to them, and others sat alone in deep thought. I couldn't blame them—I was shocked by this myself. After some time, Cosmos stood up with an uncharacteristically solemn look on his face and asked me a question.

"Would our blessings return if we came back to this world?"

"It seems like they won't. It's possible to receive a new blessing, like I did with the blessing ritual at each of the temples, but you'd start over from level one." A new blessing would at least mean that you could communicate again. "But if you return through the gate, you won't receive a gift again, since it's not the hero summoning ritual."

"The hero summoning cannot target a specific person to summon, so it would not be possible to use it to bring you back..." the princess observed. Even if it could, it wasn't clear if we would be granted the same gift.

"Ugh..." Cosmos gripped his head in his hands after taking in our explanations. He had probably thought that he could freely go back and forth between worlds after seeing the gate. But in reality, he would have to decide if he was willing to throw away everything he had gained since being summoned to this world, so there was plenty of reason to be at a loss.

This was something everyone would have to think long and hard about. Honestly speaking, even if they did choose to return, I wanted them to cooperate with me until this case with Nakahana was resolved.

Also, this wasn't the only reason why I had explained the dimensional gate in so much detail. I clapped my hands to draw everyone's attention again, and I started speaking when a hush fell.

"Everyone, hear me out. This spell can also be used to break out of the situation we're dealing with right now."

"You mean...return Nakahana to Japan?" The first one to comment was Haruno, who had been thinking in silence this whole time.

"Yeah. If Nakahana returns to Japan, her gift would vanish, so everyone who's in the state Cosmos was in would return to normal."

This is what the Goddess of Light was referring to when she mentioned that there was another solution last night. The Goddess of Chaos had probably foreseen this happening, which is why she had continued to teach me the dimensional gate spell.

“The Goddess of Light said that the prince of the sacred family is also under the effects of Nakahana’s gift,” I explained. “So, if that goes away, what do you think would happen to the expedition to Ares? The prince is the one leading that expedition, right?”

They couldn’t use their warships now, but they could prepare more warships in time, or they could invade from a land route if they wanted. In other words, we had done nothing but buy time so far, so we still needed to do something.

“...I suppose it’d be stopped,” Achilles replied. “That man does hate demi-humans, but he’s not the type to be this forceful about it.”

“Achilles is correct. I do not know how strong the hypnosis is, but in his right mind, he would not make such a mistaken decision,” the princess added.

The two answered exactly as I’d hoped. If we took the wrong step here, this could turn into the second coming of the battle between the sacred king and the demon lord. We had to do something to prevent a war from breaking out.

“In that case, I have a suggestion... How about we return to the Sacred Capital before Nakahana does and return the prince to normal?” I proposed, which made the princess and Achilles look dubiously at me. *Don’t look at me like that, I’ve thought this through.*

“Phoenix, if this was supposed to be the port of Hades, shouldn’t there also be an underground passage that connects Hadesopolis to here?” I asked.

There should be one, or else why would they build a port inside this cave? It’s not too far from Neptunopolis either, so maybe this was intended to be a secret port.

“I believe there is...but I don’t know exactly where,” Phoenix said.

“I might have an idea,” Rondalan offered. “It’s not a road, but there’s a part of the cave where the wall’s crumbled apart.” Having used it as his secret lab for so long, Rondalan knew his way well around this cave.

I asked him to lead the way to the crumbled wall, then I summoned earth spirits to reveal a road that was still intact. The rubble had sealed off the entrance.

It was similar to the underground tunnel we’d passed through before, but it was larger—big enough for Prae to comfortably walk through. I took the rubble that I’d set aside and hardened it together so that it wouldn’t collapse on us, then turned to face the rest.

“Well, we know there’s a tunnel running from east to west, and now one from the south... So, is there an exit up north?”

“Indeed, there is,” Phoenix confidently affirmed.

Achilles raised an eyebrow in response.

“Achilles, do you have any concerns?” the princess asked.

“No, Your Highness. If this passage is intact, then we should be able to make it back before the expeditionary forces.” Achilles shot glances my way as he answered. Yes, if we used this tunnel to return to Jupiter, we could make it to the Sacred Capital before Nakahana and the expeditionary forces did.

“I see,” Haruno began. “So, if we catch the prince first and return him to normal, he’ll relinquish the right to command those troops...”

“Nice idea! We won’t have to fight against the troops that way!” Cosmos gave a wide smile and a thumbs-up.

“...and the capital won’t send her any more reinforcements either.” Haruno’s expression was solemn in contrast. She probably understood—if Nakahana had used her gift on the expeditionary forces, they’d see us as enemies no matter who was commanding them. But if this allowed us to avoid a battle against the Sacred Capital’s army combined with the expeditionary forces, then it was worth trying.

“I’m curious about the remnants of Hadesopolis...” the princess said.

“The city center is all that’s left. And there were some undead walking around,” Clena recounted.

The princess furrowed her eyebrows at that. *As a princess of the sacred family, she surely can’t ignore the presence of the undead...or maybe not? She isn’t making any kind of fuss about Phoenix either.*

...Ah, now I see. The undead were originally citizens of Hades. From the princess’s standpoint, they were victims of the war that the sacred family had instigated at the time. *I’ve taken out quite a few undead in the past though... To be fair, it was a life-or-death situation.*

“Your Highness, is there a way to purify the undead or allow them to ascend?”

“It is possible with light cleric magic. I would like to try the spell if we are allowed the opportunity.”

“Well, I don’t need it! Hell, I don’t think your measly magic would do a thing to me!” Phoenix started ranting again, but Rulitora grabbed the skull and clasped it shut to make him stop talking. The spell probably wouldn’t work on him just as he’d said, but there was no need for him to yell about it right now.

“A raid on the Sacred Capital, huh? Sounds fun.” Kannami sounded like he had his own thoughts about our plan.

No one opposed the idea in the end, so it was decided: we were to head to the Sacred Capital through Hades.

Everyone started their preparations—though the only thing we really needed to do was put back everything we had taken out of the Unlimited Bath.

“I’ll take the time to perform some maintenance on her,”

Rondalan offered.

“Thank you.”

I left the Grande Nautilus in his care. Apparently, he planned to return to Neptunopolis as soon as there were signs that the expeditionary forces had left. He said that he already had a store of food here and didn't need anything from us, but just in case, I passed him a week's worth of food.

I recalled that the tunnel was cold last time, so I also readied cloaks for us. We put the rest of our luggage inside the Unlimited Bath, and then it was time to depart.

The ones leading the way through the underground tunnel were Rulitora, Clena, Roni, Rium, and I—coincidentally, the exact same group who had traveled through Hades last time. Rulitora, Clena, and I were in front to keep a lookout for any undead who might approach us from Hades. Roni could use her sharp wits to spot any attackers, and Rium was using crystal magic to check on the tunnel's condition as we progressed.

Clena had ventilated the tunnel for us last time, but this time, Prae, a wind cleric, assisted us using summoned wind spirits. She was part of the back line, but her ventilation magic reached us all the way in front. We didn't have to keep watch behind us like we did last time, so it was a load off our shoulders.

I also summoned light spirits to light up Rulitora's, Clena's, and my weapons, and I placed a light in front and behind each group to illuminate our path. Roni led our group at the very front, and Rulitora was right behind her. Behind them, Clena and I walked with Rium in between us so that we could protect her.

According to Rium's inspections, the tunnel had cracks here and there, which she repaired using magic, but we hadn't come across any spots that were already collapsed. *This tunnel is built just as sturdily as the others, huh. Looks like we can proceed without much worry.* We kept our eyes out, but we didn't see signs of any undead either.

During the day we would do regular status checks on each other, and at night we would gather up and rest in the Unlimited Bath.

The Unlimited Bath had grown a lot since the last time we'd come here. Compared to before, we were plenty comfortable, and we even livened up the nights with talks about the past.

Around noon on the third day, we came to a dead end in the tunnel. It was caved in with rubble, just like we'd encountered last time. Considering how long it had taken us to get here, this was probably the edge of where Hadesopolis had collapsed. We were almost there.

“Okay, it's my turn now. Rium, keep an eye on our direction and let me know if we're no longer going north,” I said.

“Leave it to me,” Rium responded.

I gathered up strength, summoned earth spirits, and formed a pathway through the buried rubble. We had no choice but to slow down here, so our back line caught up with us before long, but I had to make sure the path I was clearing out was stable. Safety first.

This was going to be some long and tedious work, but this time, I knew that the remnants of Hadesopolis awaited us, so there was no need for me to be anxious.

“Okay, here we are.” After some time, the path gave way to a hole with light shining through it. I cleared out the rest of the path, and a familiar sight greeted us.

Sixteen towers collapsed into each other to form a ceiling that supported this underground crater. Light and sand poured through the cracks between the towers like a white waterfall.

“This is...”

“Hades, the former kingdom of the demon lord...?”

The others came forth one by one, staring in awe at the mystical sight.

“*Th-This* is the capital of Hades...?!” Phoenix exclaimed, his jaw dropping.

“I knew it had fallen to ruin, but...” The Beast King fell to his knees. This was understandably a shocking sight for the both of them.

Meanwhile, Rulitora remained on alert and surveyed our surroundings. Clena, now that she knew her own roots, stared like she was deep in thought. Roni seemed on the verge of tears as she looked at her master.

To me, it was a little nostalgic. This was where I had met Rakti, and also where I’d had my first dream of the goddess sisters. Then I recalled when the undead had attacked us. *If I stare into space for too long here, they might start gathering, so we should keep moving.*

“For now, let’s go to those buildings in the city center. The undead might appear at any moment, so keep an eye out!” I called out to everyone, and we began walking again. *Prae seems like she still has plenty of energy, and I’m not as worn out as I was last time, but we should camp here for the night.*

Last time, we stayed at the temple of darkness, but where should we go today? As I mused over that, Rulitora raised his voice.

“Sir Touya, something is approaching.”

“What? Are the undead here already?”

I looked in the same direction as Rulitora to see something kicking up a cloud of sand. The cloud was coming toward us. I could make out some silhouettes behind the sand... Skeletons? No, it was blurry, but they were bigger than skeletons.

“Unlimited Bullet!” Cosmos made the first move. He summoned

two handguns and readied himself. Kannami's party positioned themselves in front, and Rulitora and I readied our weapons as well.

"That's..." Then, Rulitora lowered his weapon for some reason.

"Oh! It's Rulitora!" someone in the cloud of sand shouted. I recognized the loud voice and also dropped my weapon.

"Do you know them?" Kannami asked us in confusion.

Yes, I knew that voice. The group continued kicking up a cloud of sand as they ran toward us, then stopped when they came near. The largest in the group swished his striped tail as he approached us. He was gigantic, and he had a potbelly covered in yellow scales. This was...

"It's Dokutora!" Yes, this was Dokutora. He was the warrior chief of the Torano'o, a tribe of sand lizardmen who lived in the void.

Rulitora ran toward them. I wanted to follow after him, but some people in our group had never seen the Torano'o tribe before, so I stayed behind to explain.

"Oh, so you guys were the ones who defeated Maius," Balsamina said.

I was surprised to learn that Maius, a demon we had fought in the void, had actually been one of Balsamina's subordinates, but she didn't seem to care much about the fact that we had defeated him.

"He kept trying to order my troops around the moment I turned my eyes away from him." In her mind, Maius had been a traitor. He apparently had been overzealous and had had a habit of trying to overthrow those above him.

In any case, I was able to get everyone to understand that Dokutora's group wasn't our enemy.

"Sir Touya, I learned why Dokutora and the rest are here," Rulitora said. He'd brought Dokutora back with him after they'd finished talking. "They had spotted human soldiers nearby, so they came here to hide."

"Was that the expeditionary force on their way to Neptune?"

"They had seen the soldiers within Hephaestus's borders, so that is likely the case."

"Yes, we didn't see them in the void. We saw them on the other side of the border," said Dokutora.

The Torano'o tribe migrated between seasons to follow water reservoirs. Dokutora explained that he had seen the soldiers when he had taken three young warriors out hunting one day. *So, they're still following my advice to hunt in groups of four.* They weren't able to determine which country the soldiers belonged to, but it was a huge group of them, so the Torano'o had used the underground tunnel near Hephaestus to come here and take shelter.

"I thought I had camouflaged that tunnel entrance to make it hard

to find,” I said.

“Yes, it was camouflaged, all right. I was wondering where that gold ox went when it suddenly disappeared,” Dokutora responded.

I’d thought I had covered that tunnel, but apparently, I hadn’t buried it deep enough, since it hadn’t been able to withstand the weight of a gold ox and had become something like a pitfall which had caused the ox to vanish within. Dokutora’s group dug up the rubble to find the gold ox, as well as the underground tunnel.

To think that among the vast lands of the void, that ox had had the fortune to run over the exact spot where the underground tunnel was buried...or the misfortune, in its case. It was definitely fortunate for the Torano’o, since they could now use the ruins of Hadesopolis as an evacuation spot.

Back to current events, the troops that they had spotted were likely the expeditionary force that was traveling with Nakahana.

“So they went south after that,” Dokutora commented.

“They should be going back north now to return to Jupiter,” I said. *They’re traveling as an entire army, while we’ve come here with barely any interruptions, so we should be ahead of them.*

“Sounds like we shouldn’t leave here just yet...” Dokutora noted.

“Indeed, you should stay here until everything settles,” Rulitora agreed.

Considering possible events ahead of us, it would be safest for them to stay hidden here.

“Sir Touya, come visit the elder!” Dokutora insisted. “Everyone will be excited to see you!”

“Sure, we were planning to stay here for the night anyway.”

I ran it by the princess just in case, but she had no objections. Everyone was a little apprehensive about staying with the Torano’o tribe, but their weariness from our travels outweighed that.

I followed Dokutora to the ruins of the city center. As we walked down the main street, I saw a familiar row of white tents.

“So you’re staying at the plaza?”

“This was the only place big enough for us to set up all of our tents.”

I see, this was their only option. The statue of the demon lord’s human form was still standing tall at the center of the plaza. *Come to think of it, we never saw him in that form in Ares.*

Rulitora, Clena, Roni, and I entered the largest tent in the settlement. This was the same group as last time.

“Oh, Sir Touya!” The elder stood up from a sturdy-looking chair and welcomed us with his arms outstretched.

There were three other young warriors in this tent. I thought I recognized them, then remembered they were the three warriors who

had taken down a gold ox while I was staying in their settlement. I recalled that the ones assigned as the elder's guards were veteran warriors. *So those three have grown this much already?* I was impressed.

Clena and Roni, already familiar with everyone, exchanged greetings with the elder and then the three warriors. Rulitora was politely bowing his head, while the elder chided him and said that he didn't need to be so formal.

"So, Sir Touya, what brings you back here to Hades?" the elder asked after we'd finished our round of greetings.

"It's a long story..." I explained that the army that the Torano'o tribe had spotted was an expeditionary force that was heading to Neptune with a final destination of invading Ares, and that we were now heading back to Jupiter to stop them.

"I see, so that army's target was not here."

"No...at least, I assume not. They're also heading back to Jupiter right now, but they shouldn't be going through the void."

Traveling through the void without ample preparation was practically a death wish. I glanced over at Clena, who looked away from me.

I should also explain Nakahana's gift to them. She shouldn't be coming to the void, but it's a worthwhile precautionary measure.

"I see... This sounds like the perfect time to repay your favors, then," the elder said after hearing my explanation. "If you're dealing with someone with that sort of gift, we cannot ascertain how much control she has over the capital's soldiers. Take Dokutora and the rest of the warriors with you."

"...It'll be dangerous."

"That's all the more reason. We could hardly repay your having saved our lives with a lesser task."

"I appreciate the offer, but weren't you already running low on warriors? I don't want you to exert yourselves that much just to repay a favor."

"Don't worry. Thanks to your suggestion of grouping the warriors into four, the young ones are growing at a much faster pace."

The three warriors standing behind the elder looked proud of themselves.

"I understand. I'll accept your offer."

"Thank you. We shall show you the power of the Torano'o."

I couldn't reject him after hearing all that. I didn't believe the princess would have any objections to increasing our forces either. I decided to agree to his proposal.

"So, the Torano'o tribe has offered to cooperate with us."

"Wonderful!" The first one to return a gleeful response to my

announcement was the princess. She had actually been wondering if there was a way to get the Torano'o tribe to lend us their power. My talks with them had come right in time.

The princess's party had picked out one of the less damaged buildings in the plaza and was preparing to stay there for the night. They wanted to avoid using the Unlimited Bath to sleep so that I could conserve MP. That being said, they asked apologetically if they could at least take a bath. That was nothing for me at this point, so I told them to go right ahead. I wanted to use the indoor open-air bath to check on the expeditionary force anyway.

I asked the expert (technically, the former expert), Achilles, for help narrowing down the scope of our search, even a little. I also asked Pardoe and Shakova for assistance, since they were familiar with the geography of Hephaestus. The more we could cut down on our searching time, the more MP I could conserve.

I also wanted to try searching the capital to check up on the prince, but the princess stopped me, saying it'd be wasted effort. I tried looking around anyway, but it really did seem like an impossible task. The sacred castle was equipped with antimagic countermeasures, and it was especially guarded against attacks from the outside. She told me that I probably couldn't penetrate those barriers, even with my gift.

According to Sera, the temple also had similar countermeasures in place, though not as complex as the castle's. Haruno and I looked at each other after hearing that. We were probably thinking the same thing: Haruno's gift sounded similar to what they were describing. She could repel any attacks that used MP. Gifts shouldn't have been an exception since they used MP to activate. If that was the case, then it sounded like we had no choice but to wait until we reached the capital to look for the prince.

Now then, everyone was done taking their baths, so I started looking around for the expeditionary force. The more the merrier—I gathered up everyone who could help to begin the search.

Achilles narrowed down a location for us to look around. It was a pretty large area, but there was no way that they were traveling without a light source. By tracking down any lights, we would be able to find them.

"Touya, there are lights over there!" Yukina exclaimed.

"There shouldn't be anyone living there, meow!" Shakova added.

I directed the display to where Yukina was pointing and found the troops setting up camp for the night. According to Shakova, their location was right past the country borders and within Hephaestus. Since we had taken a straight tunnel underground, we were a good

way ahead of them.

“Now that I think about it...are troops from Jupiter allowed to enter Hephaestus without permission?”

“Definitely not,” Achilles replied, denying my suspicions. “They had crossed through Hephaestus and stayed in Neptune, so they must have received acknowledgment from both countries.”

“If a hero is leading them, then they can’t say nyo,” Shakova pointed out.

“Oh yeah, I guess that was also the case when Haruno took the pilgrims with her to different countries.” *Thinking about it, Cosmos was traveling with the princess and her imperial guards, and while they weren’t an army, I had taken a bunch of cyclopes with me into Ares. If the Demon Dog hadn’t been with us then, we probably would’ve been stopped at the port until we’d managed to speak with the Ares royal family and the temple of earth.*

Also, the king of Hephaestus shouldn’t know about Nakahana’s gift. There’s no reason for him to stop them.

Pardoe, hearing this, started speaking with his eyebrows furrowed. “The king of Hephaestus wouldn’t have gotten brainwashed too, would he?”

“That’s hard to say. Normally, the one to seek an audience with the king wouldn’t be the commanding officer...” Achilles murmured. That indeed shouldn’t be the case with a normal army. But if Nakahana’s aim was to use her gift, then it wouldn’t be out of the question.

“I think we don’t have to worry about that,” Haruno chimed in.

“Why do you say that, meow?”

“If he had been brainwashed, there should have been soldiers from Hephaestus among the troops in Neptune. Don’t you think, Touya?” she asked.

I nodded in response. The expeditionary force we had spotted earlier didn’t have any ketolts among them. Shakova added that if Hephaestus was cooperating with them, the soldiers’ armor would have been a little higher quality. Achilles grumbled after hearing that, but he agreed.

“So...could we ally with the Hephaestus army, then?” I considered aloud.

“Are you thinking of having the army of Hephaestus stop the expeditionary force, Touya?” Haruno asked.

“No, I’m actually thinking of having them flank the expeditionary force if we have to face them.” Of course, I wanted to avoid a battle if at all possible. I wanted to do as much as we could to that end, but in case it came to that, I wanted to use all the cards we had.

“I don’t see why not. Even if we can avoid a battle, there may be

soldiers who try to flee in the fray, and it would be beneficial for Hephaestus to prepare for that,” Clena said.

“Well, I can’t deny that.” Achilles again didn’t seem too pleased, but he didn’t dispute Clena’s argument. Rather, he added that there may have already been some soldiers who’d fled when they withdrew from Neptune. Those soldiers had a high chance of becoming bandits. That was all the more reason to inform Hephaestus about this in advance.

“But how do we contact them? We can see them on this screen, but we can’t send them any messages through it, right?” Daisy asked, flying down to my shoulder.

“No worries. The Torano’o can take messengers there. I’d estimate five days?” I answered. *I guess Clena is the only one here who knows how fast the Torano’o are.*

“In that case, Mark and I can go, meow.” Shakova volunteered himself and his son to be in charge of this. I would bring this plan to the elder later.

I spoke with the elder, and he said that they could send three warriors for the task. Since they would be going to a foreign country, one of the three was a veteran. Of the two younger warriors, one of them had a large enough build to let the ketolts ride on his back. While this larger warrior carried the ketolts, the other two would act as guards as they ran to Hephaestus.

“And that’s the plan, so can you prepare enough food for five?” I asked Roni.

“Understood. Two ketolts and three sand lizardmen,” she affirmed.

We finished preparations during the day and stayed in the plaza for the night. I needed to recover my MP, so I went to bed early. There were probably still skeletons around here, but I trusted the Torano’o to take care of them.

“You should relax your mind tonight!” Rakti advised, which then led to an argument about who would be the most relaxing for me to sleep with. We weren’t sleeping in the giant bedroom tonight, so I guess this argument couldn’t be avoided...or could it?

“Roni and I should sleep next to him!”

“No no, it should be Sera and I...though her face is red, so Rium then!”

Haruno and Clena were enthusiastically debating with each other. Roni and Rium seemed pretty into it too. Unsurprisingly, Sera seemed embarrassed by the idea of sleeping right next to me.

“Touya, let’s sleep together like old times! ♪” Yukina also volunteered herself, and then Prae offered to let me sleep on top of

her like when we bathed together. Next, Rin started chiming in and trying to drag Lumis and Sandra in as well.

“What are you gonna do about this?” Daisy sighed from atop my head, looking down at the debate. She was right; it didn’t look like they would reach a conclusion anytime soon. It was none other than me who could put a stop to this argument.

“Are you sure about choosing me?”

And so, I picked Rakti to sleep with tonight. She seemed most relaxing, after all. The other girls looked disappointed, but they seemed aware of the fact that they had gotten too riled up. I was happy that they had gone that far for me, and I was sad about not being able to sleep with them too, but...

“At least give me a good night kiss, Touuuyaaa...”

“You don’t have to say it like that.”

I usually gave everyone a good night kiss on the cheek, but to convey my thanks, I added a hug as an extra tonight. This was my regular exchange with Yukina back when she was alive, but after Yukina joined our party and we started doing that again, Clena, Haruno, and Rium had also joined in.

Shortly after, Prae joined too, and then Daisy and Rin as well for the fun of it. Roni and Lumis had joined while claiming that they were just following everyone else, and lastly, Sera and Sandra had joined in while acting embarrassed. Now, it had become the nightly routine for me to kiss everyone on the cheek and for them to kiss me back. Of course, I hugged them all as well, but Clena and Haruno seemed especially eager tonight.

And then I tried to lie down with Rakti as my hugging pillow...but for some reason, she was hugging me today.

“Rakti?”

“Okay, close your eyes and relax...”

Her modest chest was pressed against my back as she patted my head. Only one of her arms was draped over my upper side so that she wouldn’t strain herself. I noticed a while back that she was trying to act like the older sister now, but I didn’t think it would get this far.

I looked around to see everyone grinning at us. *This is a little embarrassing...but Rakti seems happy, so I won’t stop her. In fact, I’ll accept everything she’s trying to do. She said that this was the best way for me to relax, after all.* I closed my eyes and fell asleep as she patted my head.

In my dream, the other five goddess sisters and their mother were waiting for us with blankets laid out.

Later on, it would become routine for the girls to pamper me whenever we slept together, and Sera would become exceptional at it...but that was a story for another day.

The next day, Shakova's group headed out early in the morning, and the rest of us prepared to continue our journey to Jupiter. Fifteen sand lizardmen, including Dokutora, would accompany us, so we had to make sure we had enough food for all of them. I brought Rakti and Clena with me to meet the elder.

"Can you take a look at this?" I asked the elder.

"...I'm sorry, this is a language I cannot read," the elder explained apologetically.

"Sorry, I forgot about the Goddess of Light's blessing."

That makes sense. I could read basically any language in this world thanks to the blessing. I had shown him the deed to the nation of Hades that I'd received from the demon lord, which was a document stating that Hades, or the entirety of the void, had been given to me. I had assumed that it was an alphabet of this world since I could read it, but maybe he couldn't read it because it was the alphabet of Hades?

"That's the deed to the nation of Hades. It's a letter that says Hades, or the void, now belongs to me."

"What?! Why would the demon lord...?!" The elder opened his eyes wide and leaned forward.

Yeah, I would be surprised too.

"A lot happened, but one of the biggest reasons might be that I'm actually the granddaughter of the demon lord," Clena answered.

"Lady Clena..."

This deed might have been a reward for me breaking the seal on the demon lord, but I didn't think he would have gone this far if it weren't for Clena. The demon lord had even given me the Hoshi-kiri, a katana with the same name as the one he had given his successor in his previous life.

"Right now, I'm thinking of building temples for all six goddesses in one location..." I explained. "I was hoping you could assist as well."

"If you, Sir Touya, are now lord of this land, we gladly accept...but this land is not fit for human life."

"Um, this land became like this because I had been sealed," Rakti answered apologetically. That might not have been enough explanation for them to understand, so I added that if we were to rebuild a temple of darkness here, the environment might gradually recover.

"Hmm... If Rulitora returns, we could appoint him as the warrior chief again."

"Dokutora seems to be doing a fine job, though," I replied.

"He is always wanting to charge into battles head-on. A warrior chief must understand when it is best for him to stay behind and

watch.”

In short, Dokutora needed to calm down. Judging from the elder’s explanation, Rulitora did seem more fit for the job.

I wanted to run this conversation by them before leaving since they weren’t outsiders, and fortunately, the elder didn’t seem against the idea of me building the temples here. Everything would have to wait until we dealt with Nakahana, though, so that was all we spoke of it for the time being. We finished our preparations and started to head to Jupiter again.

“I know where the northern tunnel should be. This way.” The Beast King showed us the way to the buried tunnel leading north.

I guess Phoenix and the Beast King have different specializations, considering he knows more about this area.

The Beast King looked back to confirm the location of the demon lord’s castle several times as we walked. After a while, he guided us to a particular area to search. We were able to find the buried tunnel entrance after about an hour.

“Now then, is this one still in good shape...?” the Beast King muttered as he peered inside. He commented that this underground tunnel went through a mountain between Jupiter and the void.

That mountain we passed right after we left Jupiter, huh? I remembered riding a rickshaw that Rulitora pulled to get past the mountains back then.

Princess Franchellis perked her ears up when she heard that. “That mountain has always been Jupiter’s territory...”

According to the princess, during the war five hundred years ago, the Hades army often caused chaos by unexpectedly flanking Jupiter’s army whenever they attempted to invade Hades.

“Ah, now that’s nostalgic.”

So that’s why the Beast King seems to know a lot about this north tunnel. I was curious to hear more, but now wasn’t the time. I let his words go and prompted us to start moving.

“Now then, we will take the lead,” said Dokutora.

“I’ll leave it to you,” I replied.

“Beast King, go with them,” Kannami commanded.

“Roger!”

Rulitora and Dokutora led two teams of sand lizardmen in front along with the Beast King. I followed close behind. *Once we cross this tunnel, we’ll finally be in Jupiter.*

Second Bath — Scrubbing Down the Sacred Capital

Our party continued down the northern tunnel in a line. This tunnel was shorter than the others, and we reached the exit after only two days, in the morning no less.

The tunnel exited to a dense forest. The ground below us was slanted—it seemed like we were on a mountain. This was probably the mountain that Rulitora and I had passed right after leaving Jupiter.

“This really is Jupiter territory...” the princess said, awestruck.

“Sure is,” said the Beast King. The Beast King had been ordered to use guerrilla warfare against the army of Jupiter to slow them down and prevent them from allying with other countries, hence why he was so knowledgeable about this underground tunnel.

Anyway, the Sacred Capital was just a little farther away.

However, the road to the capital from here was a sloped grassy field with almost no cover. *If we move as a group here, we’ll easily be spotted. The key here will be getting to the capital as fast as we can.*

“We’re almost there, but it’s still a good distance away,” said Haruno.

“It wouldn’t be realistic to get there while remaining hidden...” Clena added.

Just as the two girls had pointed out, it’d be impossible to be discreet for the rest of the way there. In that case, we had to get there as fast as the wind could take us so that they wouldn’t have time to react—as fast as when Rulitora had pulled me in the rickshaw when the two of us had just started our travels. *Well, we don’t have any rickshaws now, but we have the Torano’o.*

“I think the fastest way to get there would be to ride on the Torano’o’s backs and run,” I suggested.

“We can handle that, but would they think it’s an enemy attack?” said Rulitora.

A bunch of Torano’o warriors running toward them at Mach speed... Yeah, I wouldn’t blame them for assuming that they’re being attacked.

“That’s, well... But that’s the fastest way, right, Rulitora?”

“Yes, but...”

“In that case, let us employ our usual method,” Princess Franchellis offered. “Ricott, can you bring it out?”

Ricott nodded and brought an extravagant flag out from their

luggage inside the Unlimited Bath. It was a gorgeous flag made of white cloth and golden embroidery. "This flag signifies that we are the party of Her Highness, the princess," explained Ricott.

"So, it's the flag of the imperial guards?" I asked.

"No, that is another flag. This one is permitted to be raised only when Her Highness is present."

Apparently, every time they were about to enter an inhabited area or depart for travel, they would enter a marching formation and raise this flag before proceeding. It wasn't too bad at the start of a journey, but it was exhausting whenever they entered town because they were already tired from their travels.

"Oh yeah, I totally get that. That sorta thing's always a lot of trouble to put up with," Rin agreed. Lumis nodded, and Sandra looked off in another direction.

I see, so the pilgrims have a similar protocol.

"Oh, I didn't know that!" Cosmos commented frankly.

Why are you surprised? I pressed him further on that point, and he answered that he thought it was just one of the several flags that they raised every time they went somewhere. *I see, he's always traveled with the princess, so there was never a time when this flag hadn't been raised.* Anyway, the princess said that we shouldn't be mistaken for attackers as long as we had this flag.

"What if your brother sent an order to dispose of you before you entered the Sacred Capital?" I asked.

"Who would obey such an order...?" she asked incredulously.

"Someone who's been brainwashed by Nakahana's gift, maybe?"

The princess fell silent. She couldn't deny that possibility.

That was the riskiest part of all this. Cosmos's kidnapping was a declaration of hostility against the princess. There was no guarantee that they didn't have anything else up their sleeves for us.

"E-Even so, there should be meaning to raising this flag as long as not everyone is under the influence of the gift."

"I see...but this flag can't be raised if the princess isn't actually part of the group, right?"

"That is correct. The flag is to signify my presence in a moving group."

"So you're saying that you'll also ride on the backs of the Torano'o to the Sacred Capital?"

"Of course."

"Honestly, I don't recommend it. They can go at unbelievable speeds."

"I will withstand it for the sake of Jupiter," the princess insisted, her head held high. Her resolution was firm.

I still have my doubts, but if she's that willing to go, I guess I'll have

her ride on Dokutora since he's the most stable runner. "That being said..."

"Yeah..."

"Ha ha ha!"

Kannami and I looked at each other while Cosmos laughed.

"The image of the princess returning to the capital riding on the back of a lightning-fast group of warrior lizardmen is..."

"It's like she joined a motorcycle gang."

"Franchellis, you are still beautiful, even if you've become a hoodlum! ☆"

"...I do not understand all the words you are using, but I will accept them as praise," she responded, although she seemed a bit troubled. She probably guessed from Kannami's and my expressions that it was a little more than simple praise.

A single Torano'o warrior could carry two imperial guards at once, after taking the guards' physiques into account.

The Beast King said that he was fine by himself. "Oh, I don't need a ride. I can match a sand lizardman's speed," he explained.

"I'll probably be okay too!" Prae said. She also seemed like she'd be fine on her own feet. The length of her stride was probably the deciding factor.

And so, besides those two, the rest of us hitched a ride on the Torano'o warriors' backs. The captain of the imperial guards, Ricott, was in charge of raising the flag. From how she talked, it sounded like she'd been intending to raise the flag like she would when riding horseback, but I stopped her, saying that it would be unreasonable.

"Um, if you raise a flag that high, wouldn't the wind resistance cause you to slow down?" Haruno added to my argument. But Ricott insisted that the flag was necessary for our safety and wouldn't budge.

"We've still got a way to go, so wouldn't it be okay to wait to raise the flag until we're a bit closer?" I pushed.

"Well, if you say so..."

We decided that we'd run at full speed until we neared the Sacred Capital, then we'd raise the flag to announce our presence for the rest of the way. Of course, Ricott would join the front lines carrying the flag so that she could raise it in an emergency.

Leading the group was me riding on Rulitora, then Clena, Haruno, Roni, and Sandra. Kannami and the Beast King also surrounded Ricott in front to guard her. Dokutora may have had his objections, but he was in the back since the princess was riding on him; we needed to do whatever was necessary to guard the princess. Also, since it was a tall order to ask everyone to cling on to the sand lizardmen as they ran at full speed, we gave everyone ropes to hang on to.

"I'll be here, then."

“I’d advise against that.”

Daisy had tried to squirm her way into my collar, but I put her inside the hood of my mantle instead.

Okay, now our formation is set. We’ll be ready to move out as soon as everyone mounts the Torano’o warriors.

“Okay, it’s time to go! Everyone, make sure you hang on tight!”

At my cue, the sand lizardmen loosed a thunderous tremor through the ground as they started running, and my group led the way. We kicked up a giant cloud of dust as we made our mad dash forward. This was even faster than the time Rulitora had pulled me along in the rickshaw, but the Beast King and Prae were both keeping up seemingly without breaking a sweat. I wanted to cover as much ground as we could like this without stopping.

“Touya... Erm, how long does it take to get to the capital from here...?” Yukina asked in a shaky voice.

I guess the rocking is a little too much for her. “It took over half a day the last time I went by rickshaw, but we’re not traveling as far this time, so it should be faster.”

“Uugghh... I don’t feel so good...” she groaned.

There’s nothing much I can do to help right now, so hang in there, Yukina.

Daisy wasn’t being tossed around too much inside my hood, but she was clinging on tightly to my hair. I just had to bear with it for now.

We continued like that for about an hour. Daisy might have gotten used to it, since she was no longer grabbing my hair as much. I hadn’t seen it last time since I wasn’t in the right mind to look around, but now I was noticing that this area wasn’t just flat ground. We were running along a gentle slope, but parts of the terrain were uneven—there was a plateau jutting out ahead of us to our right. It wasn’t tall enough to be considered a hill, but it was enough to form a shadow and shield us from view of the Sacred Capital.

“Rulitora, let’s go over there to where the plateau is,” I directed.

“Understood!”

At our current speed, it might take us another two or three hours to reach the plateau. Based on how everyone’s looking, it would be cruel to ride all the way to the capital nonstop.

“Yeah, let’s take a break at that plateau.”

“Understood. Everyone, we’re picking up speed!” Rulitora called out, and the rest of the Torano’o warriors responded in unison. They started running even faster after letting out that vigorous roar.

I heard high-pitched shrieks behind us not a second later. That was probably the imperial guards, and maybe the pilgrims too. *I can’t blame them at the speed we’re going, but...this could be bad.*

“Don’t raise your voices! Bite your tongues if you have to!” Kannami yelled before I could speak, and the cries stopped. Everyone did all they could to stay silent.

Well, at this rate, it looks like the Unlimited Bath will be put to good use during our break. Not the bath portion, but the toilet.

There’d be no meaning to reaching the capital as fast as we can if everyone arrives sick and exhausted as a result. We’re already ahead of the expeditionary force, and we won’t be noticed if we take a rest stop inside the Unlimited Bath. We should rest up as much as we can so that we can arrive at the Sacred Capital in the best possible condition.

Fortunately, we made our way to the plateau without running into any enemies. The ground here was covered in grass, so we hadn’t kicked up as much dust as we had back in the void as well.

I looked back and saw that everyone was spent. The princess had gotten carsick—or rather, lizardman-sick—and couldn’t even stand up by herself. Even Haruno looked dizzy, though she should have been used to cars. The only ones who seemed fine were Yukina, Rium, and me.

I quickly opened the door to the Unlimited Bath so that everyone could take a break. A line of a dozen or so people immediately formed outside the toilet, but I’ll spare the details. Everyone was queasy from the ride.

We wouldn’t be seen if I closed the door to the Bath, so we could take it easy in here. Since I was unaffected, I decided to use the break time for a little reconnaissance. It would take too much MP for me to search for the expeditionary force again, so I skipped that, but I wanted to check on the capital.

I brought Yukina and Rium with me to the indoor open-air bath. I summoned a view of the gate to the Sacred Capital to see if anything looked out of the ordinary, but the guards seemed relaxed.

“I guess they haven’t noticed us?” Yukina observed.

“If they had...I think they’d be a little more panicked.” Rium was right. If they had noticed us, they’d be fortifying their guards and sending out soldiers to survey us by now. But they didn’t seem to be doing either of those.

“Touya, it looks like everyone in the city is calm too. Is this normal?” Yukina asked.

“I don’t know what the city is normally like either, but I guess no one looks anxious...?” I inspected the gates again, but the number of guards there didn’t seem particularly high. It was safe to assume that we hadn’t been spotted yet.

I went back with our new information in hand to find that everyone was still drained. The girls were all lying wearily on the wooden first floor of the main building. The princess had been taken

to the tatami room to recover. I felt like she'd been spending a lot of time there recently, maybe because she couldn't handle the constant mental fatigue...

Anyway, Ricott seemed to be in decent condition, so I talked to her about the guards that we'd seen.

"It looks like the Sacred Capital hasn't noticed us yet, so how should we proceed from here?" *We're returning to the Sacred Capital as part of the princess's party, so we should follow whatever their standard protocol is.*

"If we head out again soon, we'll arrive late in the evening or at night... That's no good."

"Why is that?"

Apparently, it was standard practice to send a message in advance of your arrival to give the other party time to prepare. The welcoming party would finish their preparations and then wait for your arrival from early morning, so it was an unwritten rule to arrive within the morning to keep them from waiting. They would also avoid visiting small villages to avoid placing too much of a burden on them.

"So...would it be suspicious if we were to return to the capital without sending a messenger in advance?" I asked.

"They would suspect that something is abnormal, yes."

"But in this case, there are risks involved in announcing our arrival in advance..."

"...Perhaps," Ricott muttered, looking away. She couldn't predict exactly how the prince might react either. I wanted to follow their customs as much as possible, but we also had to keep ourselves out of danger.

"Yeah, I don't think we can do it. There's no way we can send a messenger and expect them to sit down with us for a meeting."

Nakahana had been in the capital until recently. We couldn't tell how much of it was under her gift's control. There was a chance that every commanding officer at every gate had been brainwashed. They might have been ordered to stop the princess, or even attack her, when she returned. Nakahana had gone as far as to order Cosmos's kidnapping, so we couldn't disregard the possibilities.

"But we shouldn't ignore formalities either. That would give them a reason to antagonize us."

Ricott had a point too. If they judged that something was off about our arrival, that would give them an excuse to gather up soldiers. That would put us at even more of a disadvantage, assuming the guards would also stop us.

I mulled over what we should do for a while, then Clena and Haruno joined our conversation. Those two were always reliable when we needed to talk strategy.

“We have to send out a messenger—it’s etiquette,” Clena responded right after I finished catching them up to our discussion.

“We should follow protocol so that we can at least say that we did. But there’s no need to wait for them to finish preparing after we do,” Haruno added with a mischievous giggle.

“We don’t know what those ‘preparations’ might be, after all.” Clena backed up Haruno’s words.

Just as those two had said, they might prepare to “greet” us with weapons in hand. Making our arrival before they had time to finish those preparations was a valid idea. We were essentially brute-forcing our way in, though. *This plan might work, or we might still end up in a confrontation against the guards.*

“Let’s go with Clena and Haruno’s suggestion,” I recommended. “We’ll send a messenger, but we won’t give them time to prepare after that.”

“I suppose that is the only way,” Ricott acquiesced.

In other words, we’re not going to give them any leeway. Ricott still seemed a little hesitant, but she nodded in agreement. She would have to let this one go, since it gave us the highest chance to make it to the castle in peace.

We’ll let the princess decide who should be appointed as the messenger. As for me, I’ll make some of my own arrangements to increase our chances of avoiding a battle.

The next day before sunrise, we once again headed out to the Sacred Capital. By starting our trip this early, we expected to arrive at the capital around dawn.

The princess had appointed Ricott and Achilles as the advance messengers. Ricott would go as a representative of the imperial guards, while Achilles would be the one among us with the most recognition among the capital’s guards. Ricott had ridden off on the back of a young warrior lizardman with large horns, and Achilles had left on the back of Dokutora. They’d both headed out before us, and then we followed a bit afterward. *We’ll be traveling at a slower pace today, so the princess shouldn’t get sick again...I hope.*

We ran for a few hours and managed to arrive at the gate to the Sacred Capital right around daybreak. Everyone was a little fatigued, but they were in much better condition compared to yesterday.

I looked toward the gate and saw around the same number of guards I had seen from the indoor open-air bath yesterday. We had sent out a message that we didn’t need a formal welcome, yet the guards looked tense and were standing with their backs straight. Was the source of their nervousness the princess? Achilles? The Torano’o tribe? Or perhaps...was it another group of people entirely, here in a

number comparable to the number of guards?

The leader of this other group stood before me.

“It has been a while.”

“It’s good to see you again,” I responded.

An elderly man with a long beard was in front of me. He was the elder of the Goddess of Light temple, and he had taken care of me the last time I was here. He wore a majestic white robe, and there was an air of tranquility about him.

But why was he here so early in the morning? Well, to spill the beans, I had also sent out messengers separately from the princess, but I’d had them go in secret so that they wouldn’t be noticed by the guards. How did they manage that, you ask? That would be because of the two figures wearing cloaks that covered their eyes who were standing behind the elder.

“Good work, Balsamina!” Cosmos gave a thumbs-up to one of the cloaked figures, offering his gratitude.

“That was honestly tiring. That’s the last time I’m doing this.” Balsamina sighed.

“Thank you too, Roni. You did well,” I said in turn. Roni drew closer to me, and I patted her head, which made her tail wag left and right.

I had sent out Roni as a messenger to the light temple, but the key to this mission wasn’t her, but Balsamina. Balsamina had once sneaked inside the Sacred Capital and attacked Cosmos and the princess. They used her knowledge of a secret route to quietly enter the capital in the middle of the night and deliver my letter to the temple elder.

Of course, I had already explained this plan to the princess and let her know about the secret route as well. My letter contained an explanation of our current situation and a request to use the temple knights to keep the guards in check while we made our way to the castle. *I wasn’t expecting the elder himself to lead the knights, but I guess that’s just how seriously he’s viewing this situation. I appreciate the gesture.*

The original plan was to just have the temple knights keep the guards in check, but the temple knights’ effectiveness soared with the elder here too. Thanks to his presence, it looked like we could proceed without trouble.

“Now then, where are we going first? To the temple?”

“No, we’re going straight to the castle,” I said.

The plan we had laid out with the princess was to go straight to the castle after returning to Jupiter. The more time we spent here, the more the prince could get ready to retaliate, so I didn’t want to take any detours.

“Do you want to ride the Torano’o there?” I asked the princess.

“*Ahem.* I shall go by horseback. We have horses for messengers here.”

She predictably didn’t want to proceed through the capital while earning the nickname “the rampaging Princess Franchellis,” so she would travel by horseback from here while the rest of us would go on foot. That was our only option, since there weren’t enough horses for all of us, and riding the Torano’o through the city would cause damage.

We walked openly through the streets as members of the princess’s party. The prince should have learned of our arrival when we’d passed the gates, so there was no longer any need for us to be discreet. That said, we weren’t traveling full speed ahead. Cosmos kept prodding the princess, “Are you sure we shouldn’t be in more of a rush?” but it was physically impossible for us to go any faster.

I surveyed our surroundings. We had returned suddenly, so there were no celebrations happening for the princess. It was just an everyday city street filled with people living their everyday lives. If the Torano’o were to have run at full speed here, the people in the streets wouldn’t have come out of it unharmed. That said, we wanted to get there as fast as we could, so everyone was briskly speed walking.

Despite our current situation, the princess was smiling from atop her horse and waving at children as they passed by. No doubt, she was a princess down to the bone.

The Torano’o tribe at the back of our group was drawing attention too. The residents must have been wondering why a pack of lizardmen had entered the capital. I wondered what they would think if they knew that the princess had been riding on one of those lizardmen up until just now, but I wouldn’t say a word.

There were also some soldiers on the streets who’d seemed to be on patrol when they’d passed by us. I asked Daisy to look around—all of them seemed shocked by the princess’s return, but none of them appeared to go anywhere to report it. We gathered nothing more than simple surprise from their reactions.

“This is strange,” Clena whispered from close beside me. “They had employed an army to kidnap Cosmos... Wasn’t that a statement that they were willing to fight against the princess? But the soldiers here just seem surprised. They’re not doing anything else.”

“That’s good for us, but...it’s weird that they’re not even trying to stop us, huh?” I agreed.

Clena nodded.

“But didn’t the guards at the gate seem a little off? I’m not sure what they would have done if the elder wasn’t there...” I added.

“Isn’t that strange too? That would mean the guards at the gate

were informed, but the soldiers in the city weren't."

"Yeah, that does seem weird." *So that means the prince only has control over a portion of the soldiers, and his influence hasn't spread throughout the entire capital. That brings up another question, though.* "Why would they enlist an entire army to kidnap Cosmos in the first place?"

"That's true. They even had warships."

Even if Nakahana's aim was to kidnap Cosmos, it'd be more sensible to assume that the army itself was for invading Ares. If the sacred king had known what Nakahana's real goal was, he would definitely have stopped her.

That didn't answer all of our questions, though. An attack on Ares worked as a reason to dispatch an army, but who'd even approved the attack?

"How much was the sacred king involved in this expedition in the first place? We can assume that the prince is under Nakahana's control, but..." I wondered.

"The sacred king may have been in a position where he couldn't say no." Haruno had walked up beside me and whispered in my ear no farther from me than Clena had. I reflexively turned to face her, and we stared each other in the eyes closely.

"I doubt he has passed away," Haruno posited. "In that case, the prince would be able to move much more freely."

"I see, so the prince could dispatch soldiers while hiding his real goal, but he couldn't override all of the king's authority," I surmised.

"Maybe the prince is trying to push out the sacred king and overtake his rule?" Haruno suggested.

"Jeez, all these messed up parent and child relationships..." Clena began to say, but then she looked away. She must have realized that she wasn't one to talk.

The princess may have overheard our conversation, since she spoke up. "Achilles...take command over the soldiers in the city."

"Yes, Your Highness!" Achilles, along with Kannami and the Beast King, broke from our procession.

"Is that safe?" I butted in. Kannami's party was arguably the strongest in our group. Was it okay to let them break off from us?

"There is nothing to fear. You all are still with us, and we have the Torano'o tribe as well," the princess explained. "It would be best to have Achilles take command over the soldiers in the city first."

"Basically, take the soldiers that aren't under the prince's control as our allies?"

"More accurately, this is to protect the city from collateral damage." In other words, rather than increasing our firepower, she wanted to take away their firepower. Achilles was indeed the best

choice for that, since he was a former general. “The current situation resulted from an independent decision by my brother, and my father was not in a position to stop it. I believe that your conjecture is correct.”

Judging by the reactions of the soldiers in the city, the princess seemed to think that the king hadn’t been on board with the prince’s plan.

“What do you think is happening inside the castle?” I asked.

“I suppose that my father’s power has been suppressed enough that my brother was able to deploy soldiers of his own accord,” the princess replied.

“Do you think we’ll battle?”

“I am expecting it,” the princess affirmed frankly.

It sounds like we’ll need to mentally prepare ourselves too.

Throughout our hushed conversation, the princess cast a beaming smile and waved at the residents among the streets. She whispered, “You too,” and I waved my free hand back at the children waving at us. I doubted I could fake a smile as well as the princess could, so I was glad that the Magic Eater’s helmet covered my entire face.

We made it to the castle without any confrontations, but our peaceful journey ended there. The princess raised her hand and stopped the horse, and we also stopped a distance away from the castle gates.

“Ha ha ha! How nostalgic!” Cosmos laughed carefreely, as if he didn’t register the dozens of soldiers waiting for us before the gates. “Right, Balsamina?”

“Hell if I know!”

I see, this is where Balsamina attacked Cosmos. They had their defenses fortified here.

No good, people can still see us from here. We had managed to make it all the way here while acting like nothing was off, but it’d be all for nothing if we started a fight here.

“Let’s proceed like nothing is irregular and make them make the first move. I can repel any magic attacks, and Touya can block any physical attacks,” Haruno said as she scurried closer to me. She suggested making them attack us first to give us justification to fight back.

“That would sully the sacred family’s name, so please make that a last resort,” the princess cut in.

Well, we can’t make the citizens witness a battle between the prince and the princess. The princess is still sifting through our options, so let’s put this one on hold for now.

“If it comes to that, I’ll be the only one on defense. The Magic

Eater can repel magic too,” I said. “Don’t make that face, Haruno. Protecting is my job.”

I knew Haruno had it in her, but even so, I wanted to be the only one on defense for as long as we could manage. This wasn’t something I would back down on. I looked back to see that Clena and the others seemed like they had something to say as well. *Don’t worry, I’ll protect all of you*, I thought, but I didn’t say it out loud because of all the eyes on us.

The princess let out a laugh as she observed us. “Hee hee. If it comes to that, I will entrust it to you. But for now, we must avoid a battle for as long as possible.”

“Huh? So I can’t shoot them?”

“You may not until I say so.”

The princess sure is good at keeping Cosmos on a leash...

What should we do now, though? It would do us no good to keep staring at each other like this.

“Let us proceed as usual for now. Ricott, request that the guards open the gate.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

“I’ll go with you,” I offered. Ricott was about to go on her own, but I decided to join her. *Now, now, Haruno, don’t look at us with that obvious jealousy.*

The two of us approached the gate, and the guards pointed their lances at us all at once. *Looks like they’re not willing to lend us an ear.* They didn’t seem like they were eager to be the first to attack either. There were three guards among the group, each dressed in especially imposing armor. Each one of them looked sleek and orderly. They were probably the commanders.

“Her Highness the Princess has returned! Open the gates!” Ricott stood before them and announced, unfazed by the lances. I waited slightly to the side behind her, ready to move at any moment.

The guards didn’t lower their lances, but instead they looked at each other and started whispering. The three commanders didn’t budge, though—they drew their swords and shouted, making the guards return to formation.

“Do not falter! The traitor shall not pass!”

“How dare you!” Ricott was about to jump at them in rage at those words, but I quickly grabbed her arm and pulled her back. I wasn’t expecting to have to move to stop us.

Traitor, huh? They must be referring to the princess, right? Not me, who revived the demon lord, right? I had some doubts myself, which was why I hadn’t gotten riled up like Ricott and managed to stay cool.

“This won’t get us anywhere. Should we go back for now?” I asked.

“No, that would make them think we admitted to their accusations...!” Ricott growled.

“Ricott! There appears to be a misunderstanding! Come back!” Princess Franchellis yelled at us from behind.

“Tch...! Let’s go back for now,” Ricott said in frustration. She had no choice but to listen to orders, so she didn’t put up any more of a fight and quietly returned. I followed behind, making sure to guard her back.

I thought it was unusual for the princess to yell so loudly, but her aim must have been to let the citizens overhear that “the guards of the castle had a misunderstanding.” Of the three commanders, one of them had started swinging his sword and yelling to chase us and beat us up, but the other two were frantically holding him back.

Who would the citizens think was in the wrong—the one shouting empty threats, or the one quietly backing off? The other two commanders probably realized that as they dragged the one kicking up a fuss away and inside the castle.

“My, it seems that it will be difficult to make them make the first move now.” Such was the first thing the princess said when Ricott and I had returned.

“Were you planning to use Haruno’s idea the whole time?” I asked.

“She said it might work out if we could pin the blame on that man earlier,” Clena came up beside me and murmured. Princess Franchellis was as clever as always.

The princess cleared her throat. “Let us take a step back and reassess the situation.”

The expeditionary force would probably take another few days to arrive, but could we really afford to wait? “Do we have the time?” I questioned.

“That will be no issue.” The princess smiled back, setting my concerns to the side. “I shall demonstrate that I am still composed while the attention is on me. In the meantime...you know what to do, I assume?”

She really has a radiant smile. Basically, she was asking that we sneak into the castle while she acted as a decoy.

The imperial guards had started speedily setting up the tent for the night. They really were used to this. *I see, she can’t voice her plan out loud while we’re out here.* I looked around to see the residents looking back at us, puzzled. It was no wonder, since we had yet to enter the castle.

The princess and I entered the tent. *We should be fine talking in here as long as we don’t raise our voices.* I didn’t want to waste any time and asked her the most important question on my mind.

“So, I assume you want us to make contact with the sacred king inside the castle, but is there another route to get in?”

“I will teach you. Do not say this to anyone else, okay? Though I will block the route after this.”

“Is it like a secret getaway route for the sacred family?”

“I could never reveal such a route to anyone...but it is a getaway route only for me.”

What does she mean, only for her? Did this princess secretly escape from the castle in the past? I looked over at Ricott, who was staring off into the distance with a vacant expression. *What’s she thinking back to? Well, I can imagine.*

“Ha ha ha, Franchellis can be such a tomboy.”

That might be the case, but that’s not the point here, Cosmos.

Anyway, the princess swiftly wrote something down on a piece of paper, then stamped it and handed it to me. It was a mandate ordering me to enter the castle and contact the king.

“As long as you possess that, you have the right to sneak into the castle using the hidden route, but...I cannot say how effective this letter is right now, so do not rely on it entirely.”

“It depends on how much control the prince has taken, huh?”

The princess nodded. *The mandate is nothing more than a hedge, so we should sneak in as quietly as possible without being found. Well, as long as we have this, we’ll be considered the “princess’s secret messengers” and not “criminals invading the castle.”* That was more than enough for us. I assumed she was also hoping that we would take care of this as peacefully as possible. I didn’t want to make a ruckus either, so she could rest assured on that front.

Now then, who should I take with me on this mission? I exited the tent back to the rest of our group and thought about the members.

“I shall assist!”

“No, you’d stand out way too much, Rulitora.”

Rulitora was the first to volunteer as a bodyguard, but unfortunately, he was way too big. Bringing him along would only increase our chances of being discovered.

“Rather, you should draw attention to yourself here, Rulitora. Make sure no one realizes that I’m gone.”

“As you command...”

Rulitora and I had originally departed from the Sacred Capital as a party of two. We had stood out ever since our stay at the temple, so our names would have spread throughout Jupiter by now.

“I suppose I should join you,” Haruno suggested.

“I think so too. We’ll likely need your powers, Haruno.”

On the other hand, Haruno was a necessary party member here. She was adept at seeing past lies.

“I’ll go as well,” Clena offered. “I might need to help explain the situation with the demon lord.” If Clena was joining us, then so were Roni, Brahms, and Mem. Brahms and Mem were especially well equipped for this mission.

“You should come too, Daisy.”

“Gotcha.”

I also selected Daisy, who had a small body and could fly. The rest weren’t particularly fit for a covert mission, so they would stay here. Yukina argued that she could fly too, but she was much bigger and would be spotted easily.

Now that we had our members, it was time to go down the secret route. The route that the princess revealed to us was an aqueduct that brought water inside the castle. There was a passageway on either side of the aqueduct wide enough for a person to walk through, probably for maintenance purposes. It was difficult finding our way there since it was pretty well covered, and we would have gotten lost if Ricott hadn’t come along as our guide.

There was a guard at the entrance, but Ricott talked to him, and he immediately let us through. They both seemed used to this.

The princess had probably made good use of this route. Ricott and the guard both looked exasperated, but I decided not to ask them about it.

“I’ll let you pass if it’s an order from Her Highness, but...” The guard seemed reluctant. We were the princess’s secret messengers, but if the guard let us through here, he might be considered responsible for whatever happened later.

“In that case, why don’t we say that we knocked you out, and you can pretend to have fainted on the ground for a bit?”

“No, someone else might sneak in if I do that.”

I suggested pretending that we had forced our way in, but the guard’s dedication to his job won out...

“Um, while we’re here, I’d like to ask... What’s it like inside the castle right now? The princess was stopped at the gate,” Haruno asked, and the guard looked back at us with furrowed eyebrows.

“I don’t enter the castle myself that often, so I don’t know the details, but...I heard rumors that His Majesty the King has fallen ill, and now the prince has taken charge.”

“Rumors, huh...? Was a cleric called in?”

“A pastor has visited a few times,” the guard replied. “I saw one of them once at the castle gates.”

“A pastor?” Clena asked in suspicion. “If the king is ill, then they should have called in the best cleric in the country.”

“I see, they should have called in the temple elder, huh...”

And yet they only called in a pastor. There must be a reason for that.

“Um, the elder is known to be amicable with the princess...” Ricott interjected. That led us to...

“So the one who called for the pastor wasn’t the king, but the prince,” Roni concluded.

That seemed like the most likely scenario. In that case, there was a good chance that the king wasn’t sick, but rather just being confined somewhere. The prince had called for a pastor to make it look like the king wasn’t making public appearances because he was ill.

We thanked the guard and entered the aqueduct. Ricott’s guidance also ended here.

The ground below our feet was damp, and the air was chilly, but it didn’t smell. There was the scent of water, which was crystal clear inside the aqueduct. The walls and ceiling were barren, but there was also no moss, so it seemed well maintained. This looked somewhat similar to the underground tunnels in Hades. Maybe they had been built around the same time.

The water made sounds beneath our feet for every step we took. While small, the sounds echoed within the aqueduct. *We should proceed with caution from here on.*

“Daisy, you take the lead.”

“Don’t run away and leave me, okay?”

“Of course I wouldn’t. I’d run over to help you instead.”

I wanted to resolve things as nonviolently as possible, but that of course didn’t mean I’d sacrifice any of my comrades. Daisy flew ahead of us, frequently glancing behind her. It seemed like she didn’t want to stray too far from us, since she would often look back to make sure we hadn’t fallen behind.

We also tried to walk fast enough to keep up with her, but there was a chance traps had been laid out around here, so Roni and the others had to keep an eye out as we progressed. It wasn’t only Daisy, but all of us who had to stay on alert as we moved.

We continued walking for a bit, and while we made frequent eye contact, no one spoke, so the sounds of water dripping from the ceiling echoed loudly within the aqueduct. Right as we approached a crossing, Daisy suddenly changed her trajectory and flew back to us in a panic.

“They’re here! Right around the corner, three of them!” She flew to my head and whispered into my ear in a shrill voice.

“Okay, let’s hide,” I said, but this was a one-way road. The only place we could hide was inside the water—in normal circumstances, that is.

I remained calm and opened the door to the Unlimited Bath, and everyone jumped inside. I heard not only footsteps, but voices from around the corner. It was too late for them, though. Daisy and I

entered last, and I closed the door; the door outside would vanish like this too.

"They'll never be able to find us out there," I said.

"It's a little late to say this, but this thing really is cheating." Daisy snickered.

After that, we used the indoor open-air bath to look outside and confirmed that the guards had passed us without incident.

The guards were Jupiter's soldiers stationed at the castle. They wore more distinguished armor compared to the soldiers patrolling the city.

I scanned the entire aqueduct and found another group of guards. We knew their location now, though. Daisy led our group again, and when we got close, we hid inside the Unlimited Bath again and waited for them to pass.

We made it through the aqueduct like that. It exited to a courtyard within the castle, so we went inside the Unlimited Bath again, and I used the indoor open-air bath to survey the castle's interior.

"Haruno, how much do you remember about the castle?"

"Not very much, to be honest..."

"I don't remember anything besides the throne room either..."

The two of us had stayed at the temple, so there's no helping it. For now, let's survey the throne room to start off with, then look around from there. The king's room should be even farther inside.

I used the screen of the indoor open-air bath to display the throne room. It was a glamorous room, comparable in size to the one in Hephaestus. There was a red carpet leading the way to the throne. The stunning golden embroidery was nostalgic.

There were several people inside the throne room now. Reports that the princess was outside the gate had probably spread. Sitting on the throne was not the king, but a much younger man. His long blond hair was parted down the middle. His forehead was slightly wide, and he had a fair, almost translucent complexion. I could see his resemblance to the princess—they both had wisdom in their looks, though this man had much sharper eyes. You could describe them positively as composed, or negatively as cold.

The man wore a loose, elegant white robe. He was sitting on the throne in a dignified manner. Ten men were kneeling before him. I didn't feel the same power emanating from him that I'd felt from the king, though he did seem intimidating. It was my first time seeing this man, but I could tell at a glance: he was the prince of Jupiter.

"Touya, what should we do?" Haruno asked.

"Let's ignore him," I replied without hesitation.

"I figured."

This wasn't the time to pick a fight with him. If this were a battlefield, I'm sure I'd have defeated him without a second thought, but right now, the ones whose place it was to deal with the prince were the sacred king or Princess Franchellis.

Seeing the prince brazenly sit on that throne was a vital piece of information, though. The people around him didn't seem to question it. Either he had forced them to accept the narrative that he was sitting in for the king, or they were all partners in crime. Either way, now I had no doubt that the prince was the one who was preventing the princess from entering the castle.

The next question was where the sacred king was right now. I shifted the camera to a bird's-eye view of the castle. The throne room was around the center of the castle, slightly on the northern side. The main gate was on the southern end, and I could see the princess's tent there too. A crowd had formed around the tent. It looked like not only soldiers, but also civilians had started gathering around them. *Rulitora and Dokutora sure stand out, even when I look at them from this far away.*

The city residents had probably gathered around wondering why the princess wasn't entering the castle. I was sure she'd come up with a convincing excuse, so I didn't worry about her.

"If they confined him, it might be inside one of the rooms inside the towers," Roni said, pointing to one of the towers along the castle walls.

The towers weren't especially tall. I peered inside each one from a window, but they were only filled with guards on lookout duty or on break. I didn't find the king anywhere.

"For a castle of this size, they might have a prison somewhere," Mem posited.

"Like an underground dungeon?" I asked.

"Maybe not that extreme..."

"The culture here is too different compared to Ares..." Brahms remarked.

Brahms and Mem couldn't confidently say one way or the other. It was indeed hard to compare this castle to the one in Ares, which in itself was an underground city.

I tried directing the camera underground, but all I could find were storerooms—no signs of a dungeon. Maybe they had one built somewhere outside the castle. Taking the sacred king outside of the castle was a risky move, though, so there was a low chance that they were keeping him imprisoned elsewhere.

"It seems like he's probably being confined somewhere within the castle," I deduced.

"Maybe somewhere on the north side, opposite the front gate? The bedrooms for royalty should be there," Clena surmised, inspecting

the castle's layout. "They might have claimed that he's sick and used that as a front to put him under house arrest in his own room... That's a relatively gentle way of doing it."

I see. So the story is that the prince is substituting for the sacred king, who's trapped sick in bed. They could keep up appearances like that, assuming the princess isn't around, at least. If they hadn't kidnapped Cosmos, maybe the princess would have continued her journey without suspecting a thing, but perhaps that was something that Nakahana had pushed them to do.

Moving along, I searched the northern section of the castle. The north side was all one floor, and it didn't seem to have a rooftop terrace either. It was much more snug compared to the rest of the castle. Considering how this was the private quarters for the sacred family, it likely hadn't been built to accommodate many visitors. That probably made it easier to protect too.

It'll be a pain if the sacred king is being kept here... I thought as I searched around, and as luck would have it, I found him in the innermost room.

"There he is...in the most heavily guarded room," Roni said with some wariness in her voice.

There were even more guards there than the other places we had searched so far. Two were stationed in front of the room, and there were others patrolling the surrounding area in pairs without leaving a single blind spot. Maybe those were knights serving the prince. They were all wearing extravagant yet practical armor.

The sacred king's room faced out to the castle's courtyard. Needless to say, there were guards stationed there as well.

"How uncouth," Clena muttered as she watched the soldiers march across the beautiful garden in full armor. I could understand how she felt.

I looked inside the room and saw the sacred king lying down on a large bed.

"Hey, Touya...aren't his eyes open?" Haruno observed.

"Huh?" I looked more closely, and indeed, the sacred king's eyes were open. *Is he really asleep?*

He looked thin, or rather, scrawny. Even his magnificent handlebar mustache seemed a little downtrodden. There was no longer a trace of the dignified air that I remembered of him.

"Is he actually sick?"

"Can you move a little closer to that man, Sir Touya?" asked Brahms.

"Oh? Sure, is this enough?" I zoomed in on the sacred king.

"Hm?!" Brahms tried to peer in closer, but he hit his head against the wall and promptly put his hands over his forehead. Since the

screen was dome-shaped, you could only look above or in front of you. Daisy was holding back laughter from atop my shoulder.

Anyway, Brahms turned back to face us with a serious look on his face.

“They are using drugs on him... It is a type of sleep medication.”

“Sleep medication? So he really is asleep?” I asked.

Brahms explained that it was an extremely powerful drug that put the user in a state of apparent death. *Is that really something you should categorize as a sleep medication?*

Apparently the drug was called “Eternal Slumber.” It sounded exactly like a curse, but it could be used to stop the progression of a disease. “Poison and medicine are two sides of the same coin,” so to speak.

“So, does that mean the king really is sick?” I asked.

“I can’t say... This drug can also be used to inhibit a criminal who has gone rogue,” Brahms replied.

So there’s a chance that they drugged him just to keep him constrained. “Is there an antidote?”

“Of course. Though I do not have it on hand.”

It might be better to ask the princess about this. Negotiation is out of the question right now, so ideally, we should take the sacred king back to the princess so he won’t be considered a hostage.

Now then, the problem is the number of guards. How should we approach this?

“Can you try sneaking in by yourself, Daisy?” I asked.

“I can’t carry a person that big.”

If the king could walk by himself, maybe that plan could have worked, but it didn’t seem possible for Daisy alone.

“Roni, do you think you can get inside that room without being spotted?” Clena asked.

“Getting all the way inside would be difficult.” Roni shook her head.

“Um, we could ‘deal with’ the guards as we make our way to the room...” Mem suggested.

“Let’s avoid that as much as possible.” I put Mem’s violent idea on the back burner for now as a last resort.

“Aren’t the guards being controlled by Nakahana’s gift?” Haruno interposed.

Yeah, which is why I want to avoid harming people who aren’t here of their own volition.

“How about I dispel the effects with my gift?”

True, Haruno could return the guards to their senses with her gift like she’d done with Cosmos... “But we can’t assume everyone is being controlled...”

The problem was that we had no way to tell who was being controlled and who wasn't. We were dealing with the prince and his knights. There were probably some knights who had pledged their allegiance to the prince and were only following orders. If they were simply being mind controlled, we could resolve the issue by just negating the effects, but otherwise, we would end up in a confrontation. I wanted to avoid that as much as we could.

"But you guys have no way of getting there without being seen, right?" Daisy said, circling above my head.

She was right. Mem said that we might have a better chance at night, but the princess was waiting for us outside of the castle gates. I didn't want to spend too much time here.

So, the plan that gives us the highest chances of settling things peacefully is Haruno's... "Oh, wait."

Then, I had an idea.

We progressed through a pitch-black passageway with the aid of a summoned light spirit until we eventually reached a dead end. There was a ladder going up from there. We climbed it and hit a hard ceiling, but...

"Summon spirit."

I opened a hole in the ceiling using earth spirits. A heavy piece of fabric blocked the space above that, but I cut a hole through it. I raised my head through the opening, and...we were inside the sacred king's room.

To reveal my trick: the path we had just gone through was the secret getaway route used by the sacred family. The princess had said that she would never reveal such a route to us—which meant that one existed.

I had also been wondering why they had made the sacred king stay asleep in his own room. The likely cover story was that the prince was taking over the country's affairs in place of the sickly king, but in that case, they didn't have to force the king into sleep. They were keeping him so strictly guarded too. The sacred king would have had no means to escape either way, yet they'd drugged him to sleep. What was the reason for that?

The answer was: the king's room had an entrance to an escape route. I figured the escape route would lead underground, so I searched around and found it pretty quickly. The screen of the indoor open-air bath could go through walls and caves, after all. Just making some haphazard guesses was all it took to bring any hidden tunnels or secret rooms to light.

I followed the passageway to the other end, and it led us to the aqueduct that we had just been through. Thinking about it now, those

guards had probably been placed along the aqueduct because it was connected to an escape route.

We couldn't figure out what exactly the door into the escape route from the aqueduct was supposed to be or how we were supposed to open it, so I just dug a hole using summoned earth spirits. We entered the passageway, made our way through it, and finally arrived at the sacred king's room.

There were now two holes on either end of the tunnel, and the fabric I had cut up appeared to be a very expensive rug, but I figured it was a permissible sacrifice since we had done it to avoid casualties on the human side.

With all that said, that brings us back to the present.

Let's get this over with quickly. We confirmed that no one other than the sacred king was in the room, then entered. All the curtains here had been shut, perhaps to avoid visibility from the outside. That was convenient for us.

There was no way for us to transport the king other than for me to carry him down the ladder. Haruno, Clena, and Roni helped hoist the king's large frame onto my back, then they tied him to me so that he wouldn't fall. If Brahms had been here, I'd have asked him to do this, but he and Mem were guarding the entrance to the tunnel from the aqueduct.

Now that we had the king, we had no reason to stay here any longer. We went back down the ladder before any of the guards might have noticed us.

I couldn't do anything about the hole in the rug, but I summoned earth spirits again to close up the passage's entrance. Even if anyone had seen us, they couldn't follow us down here.

We went down the ladder and speed walked through the passageway, the king still on my back. We reconvened with Brahms and Mem at the aqueduct, then escaped the aqueduct as well.

"Y-Your Majesty?! Where do you think you're taking...him..." The guard at the aqueduct almost stopped us, but Mem used a spell to put him to sleep. We'd have been in trouble after he woke up, so Brahms carried him with us.

I used earth spirits to form pillars in a grid pattern at the entrance to the aqueduct. *This should keep anyone from chasing us.*

Now all that was left was to bring the sacred king back to the princess. We covered the king's face with a hooded mantle so that passersby wouldn't notice that it was him.

"This isn't really the job of a hero, huh?" Clena remarked.
"Kidnapping a member of the sacred family is more like..."

"It's not kidnapping, it's a rescue mission, so we're okay!" Haruno insisted.

I respectfully ignored the conversation happening behind me. I also thought about how the situation had thrown our plans a bit off track, but that things were going a lot better than how my original mission to “do something about the revival of the demon lord” had ended up. Plus we had kept things peaceful. Mostly.

Thanks to the hooded mantle covering the king, no one questioned us as we walked through the streets. However, the guard we had put to sleep had woken up quickly. We were about to put him to sleep again since we didn’t want him causing an uproar, but he said that he wanted to go along with us to the princess.

“The princess’s secret messengers abducted the king from the castle that is currently under the prince’s rule... What a bother I’ve gotten myself into... On the day that I was on duty, of all days...” He was mumbling something, but I guess he had accepted his fate—or at least given up—by now, so we let him quietly come along with us.

We made it back to the princess’s tent without further incident. Civilians had formed a crowd around the tent, but when they saw me carrying a lifeless man on my back and that we even had a royal guard with us, they hastily formed an opening for us to walk through.

As soon as we entered the tent, the princess rushed up to us, having seen that I was carrying someone. She had probably figured that the only person we could possibly bring back right now was the sacred king.

I explained why the guard was here too. “He noticed that we had the king with us when we exited the castle, so we brought him with us.”

“Oh, I see,” said the princess.

“Um, it’s true that he left his post as a royal guard, but it was because he was trying to protect the king, so we ask that you not serve him punishment,” I pleaded.

“How is the aqueduct now?”

“I covered it up using earth spirits.”

“Spells like that should not work on castle grounds,” she said, but it had worked for me, so there was no helping it at this point. The princess thought for a moment, then raised her head and said to the guard, “Well, so be it. You will not be punished for this deed.”

The guard breathed a loud sigh of relief in response...

“However, you may not return as it is. You shall stay with us until this is resolved.”

...but then his shoulders slouched immediately afterward.

“Now then, please take your leave.”

“Y-Yes! *Sigh*, today is not my day.” He muttered that last bit under his breath, but since he was still nearby, I heard him loud and clear. I pretended that I didn’t, though.

The guard left the tent, and then I showed the sacred king to the princess. The princess almost raised her voice, but she hurriedly covered her mouth. She didn't want the people surrounding the tent to hear.

The princess drew closer to the king and softly called out to him, but of course, he didn't respond. I asked Brahms to explain the effects of the drug to the princess. Though even in Ares, it was something heavily guarded by their royal family, so he didn't have all the details.

Cosmos draped a blanket over a table to make a makeshift bed, and we placed the king there.

"That drug is managed by the sacred family. To think that it would be used on my father..."

The drug was apparently meant to be used only on the most uncontrollable criminals, so it was customary for only those who governed their country's public order to have access to it. In Jupiter's case, that was the sacred family. That meant that the princess was actually the most knowledgeable about this drug among us.

According to the princess, in Hephaestus, the fire temple managed the drug instead of the royal family. It wasn't meant to be public knowledge, but that revealed a bit about the power relations within that country.

The ketolt blacksmiths held the most power in Hephaestus, but they didn't want politics to get in the way of their blacksmithing work, so they had given the job of the royal family to humans. Maybe they had handed management of the drug to the royal family as well, and then the royal family had handed it to the fire temple in turn.

In any case, we needed to wake up the sacred king somehow. The princess had attempted to call for negotiations several times while we were away, but she hadn't received any response. The prince didn't seem like he was down for discussion. However, now that we had the sacred king with us, he couldn't ignore us any longer. The odds had quickly tipped in our favor. Now, the only problem left was how to wake the king...

"Is there anything we can do to get rid of the drug?" I asked.

"The sacred family also manages the antidote, but I do not have it on hand..." the princess lamented.

So they do have an antidote... Wait. Antidote?

"So this really is a poison and not sleep medication?"

"Touya, poison and medicine are two sides of the same coin," Haruno interjected. Thinking about it, anesthesia was essentially a poison that caused paralysis. Similarly, this was either sleep medication or a coma-inducing poison. *I don't know if a poison like that really exists, but it sounds like a curse, so maybe magic could have something to do with it.*

“Would an antidote spell work in this case?” I asked.

“It would not.” The princess immediately shut me down. Because of its intended usage, it wasn’t meant to be so easily cured.

“What kind of poison can’t be cured by an antidote spell?”

“The spell is simply not strong enough, since the medicine itself is created using powerful magic.”

She wouldn’t tell me the details, but apparently, before the drug was to be administered, several people would perform a ritual where they poured MP into the drug. The large amount of MP would prevent even an antidote spell from having any effects. It was a magic drug, in a sense. I assumed the antidote was made using similarly powerful magic.

“A large amount of MP...?” Clena said, looking at me. I was thinking the same thing.

If you’re looking for a large amount of MP, look no further. “Would an antidote spell work if I used even more MP than that?”

“Theoretically... How much do you mean?” The princess pressed me further, probably picking up on what I was getting at. She had just heard about how I’d transformed the aqueduct even though it was protected against magic, so maybe she was already considering the possibility.

“Knowledge and skill aside, if we’re talking about magic capacity alone, I might have more than San Pilaca.” San Pilaca was the arch-cleric who had fought alongside the first sacred king.

“...That is not a very funny joke.”

“It’s not a joke. And it’s only in terms of pure magic capacity.”

The number of goddess blessings a person could receive was based on how many the person themselves could sustain. Most people could only hold one blessing, and San Pilaca’s limit was apparently five.

In comparison, I had seven—the blessings of the six goddess sisters and their mother, the Goddess of Chaos. It would make sense to assume that I had more magic capacity, though I doubted I stood a chance against him in terms of the number of spells we could use and our skill sets.

“I’ll hold off if failing means he’ll get worse or something...”

“No, failure would simply mean that his sleep remains unbroken, so it is worth a try.” The princess still seemed incredulous, but she judged that there was no harm in giving it a shot. I summoned my strength and stood next to the sacred king.

“Okay then, let’s get right to it... Antidote!” I placed my hand on the king’s forehead and chanted a spell, then a strong light emerged beneath my hand.

This felt different from when I had cast the spell on the dragon. I felt some resistance. *I see, this is the MP that was poured into the*

medicine—this is what had blocked the antidote spell from working. It's not a big deal for me, though. I can handle this.

I poured in more MP, and the feeling of resistance vanished without a trace. I had offset the MP that had been poured into the medicine. The last step was to purify the medicine that had put the king into a coma. I couldn't afford to mess up here. I rebalanced the amount of MP I was channeling and carefully continued with the purification.



“Mm, where am I...?”

“Father!”

The sacred king woke up shortly after I’d finished casting the spell. *Did the medicine alone put him into that deep of a sleep? It really is powerful.*

The king looked around, confused by the princess hugging him. The rest of us stood a distance away and gave a slight bow when our eyes met.

“Where am I? I remember being in my bedroom,” he asked, looking straight ahead at Cosmos. He still seemed haggard, but there was strength in his eyes.

“Huh? Oh, this is a tent in front of the castle.” Cosmos glanced around him, but he eventually figured out that the question was directed at him and answered while fidgeting. *Without Kannami here, the only Hero of the Sacred King here is you, Cosmos. Keep at it.*

“A tent in front of the castle? Why would you set up a tent here...?”

“Because they won’t let us in?”

“Denying Franchellis entry? Who would commit such an act of sacrilege?”

“Sacrilege?! U-Um...”

“The prince. He was also likely the one who drugged you to sleep,” I interjected since Cosmos seemed to be at his limit.

The king fell silent. I didn’t know if he was reacting to the prince or the drug, but he looked like he was remembering something.

We explained the events until now to the king: how we had been sent as secret messengers of the princess to invade the castle and rescue the king, and how I had cured his coma by using an antidote spell.

“You cured that medicine with a spell? Impossible!”

“Father, please stop there. It is true...” the princess scolded the sacred king. The spell was probably the easier of our two options, the other being attempting to secretly get our hands on the official antidote managed by the sacred family.

The king tried to get up, but he couldn’t muster any strength in his legs, and he started to topple over. The princess moved to stabilize him; however, even if he’d grown thinner from being in a coma, he was still a grown man, and she couldn’t support him with her own small stature. I was about to rush over to help, but Cosmos got there before me.

I had been hoping to make a move before the prince had noticed that the king had gone missing, but it looked like the king needed to recover first.

“He didn’t have anything to eat while asleep, I assume. Your Highness, I suggest giving him a meal first...” Haruno offered while observing them.

“That is right,” the princess agreed. “Father, please rest here. Ricott and the others are standing guard outside the tent.”

“O-Oh, very well then. Ah, give me a drink as well. Some liquor, if you will.”

“How can you try to drink in your condition, father?! Have wine instead. We can prepare one immediately.” The princess scolded the king again, then asked some of her imperial guards to run an errand. I grinned at the interaction, then suggested something to the princess.

“Your Highness, should we use the tatami room?”

The tatami room was the Japanese-style room of darkness that the princess had often used. It was a gift from the darkness blessing and accelerated recovery from fatigue, so it was the perfect spot for the king to recover.

“Yes. May we partake of your offer?”

“Of course. Cosmos, can you carry him on your own?”

“Ha ha ha! Leave it to me!”

“Wait, we are in front of the castle, are we not? We cannot back down without entering the castle...”

“Do not worry, father.”

Perhaps out of a sense of duty, the king didn’t want to give up our position here. There was no need for him to worry, though. We were about to lead him inside the Unlimited Bath.

“Your Majesty, this way...” I opened a door inside the tent.

“This is...your gift, is it? This is much bigger than what I had heard from the reports...” the king said as he entered the Unlimited Bath while leaning on Cosmos’s shoulders. He looked up at the large building within. The reports he had heard were from before my travels, when it was nothing more than a small bathroom.

“It grew during my travels as I received blessings from other goddesses.”

“And what is this?” The king’s eyes stopped at the Gravesword. I kept it right by the entrance so that I could bring it out in an emergency.

“I took the grave marker that the first sacred king used to seal the demon lord and turned it into a sword.”

“I see, so that is what this is...”

In truth, the first sacred king had sealed the Goddess of Darkness, not the demon lord, by accident. That had caused the birth of the land known as the void. Maybe the king knew about all that already, but I didn’t want to cause him any more headaches right now, so I didn’t give him any more details.

“Cosmos, take His Majesty to the tatami room.”

“You got it! That’s the room that Franchellis always rests in!”

That’s a nice comment. If the king knows that the princess has also used that room to rest, he’ll feel more at ease.

The sacred king went inside the room while still leaning on Cosmos. His back seemed a little small from where I stood.

The king had been in a coma this entire time. From his perspective, all that had happened so far was that he had woken up and found himself abducted somewhere outside the castle. *What does he remember from before then? Does he realize that his own son drugged him? Or maybe he’s acting like this exactly because he does realize?*

Haruno came up to me as I was thinking. “It looks like he doesn’t believe everything we’ve told him yet.”

“You think so too, huh? I can’t blame him in this situation...” I agreed with her evaluation. We had only managed to get this far because the princess was here. If it weren’t for her, we’d have been considered kidnappers right now.

“You two are Heroes of the Goddess, after all,” Clena came up beside us and whispered.

“Those distinctions don’t really mean anything to me...”

“They’re important to the sacred king, at least.” She had a point.

The king was going to have a meal and take a bath after this, then he’d straighten up his appearance. We didn’t have much time to spare, but we had to allow him that much, or else he couldn’t make a public appearance. *I hope he acknowledges that we mean no harm in the meantime...*

“Oh, would it be okay for Roni or Mem to bring a drink to him?” I suggested.

“I would advise against it for now,” Princess Franchellis answered.

“Oh, I mean because my father is still not familiar with them.”

I see. She added that to clarify that them being demi-human isn’t the reason. On that note, the princess had stayed with us instead of following her father, so I assumed she wanted to discuss our next steps.

“Um, I can do it.” Foley volunteered herself to deliver a drink to the king. She and the king were already acquainted with each other, since she was the bearer of that prophecy from before our travels.

“What drink shall I bring him?”

“I would like to bring him everything we have and let him choose...” The princess glanced at me.

“I’m okay with that. Bring him anything you’d like. We don’t have any alcohol on us, though.”

“He would be better off without,” the princess said with a laugh.

I didn’t trust Cosmos to be alone with the king for too long, so I

asked Foley to bring him the drinks right away.

A bit after this, the sacred king would sing praises for the apple juice, noting its amber color and bright flavor. I wondered what he'd have thought if he'd known that it was the demon lord's favorite too.

Next, it was time to make him a meal. The princess and I discussed what we should cook and decided on congee. It was the most appropriate choice since the king was still recovering.

"What is the difference between normal rice and congee?"

"The rice is simmered to be a lot softer and easier to digest. It's easy to eat even if you're feeling sick."

"I see. We have a similar food that is made from oats."

I wonder if she's talking about something like porridge. It sounds like she's on board with the plan for congee, then.

Rice was an unknown food for the king, but the same went for the drinks, so I'd leave it to the princess to explain it to him. The princess said she'd bring the congee to the king herself. I wondered if that was okay in her position, but I guess it was, considering she was just looking after her father.

I was in charge of cooking. *It's been a while, but I'm used to making congee.*

I didn't need much help either. We were short on time, but I let Haruno and the others who had sneaked into the castle with me rest. Rakti, the princess, and I entered the kitchen.

"I'll bring rice from my sister's quern-stone... Huh, you're going to use eggs too?"

"Yeah, this is my secret recipe."

Yukina fluttered into the kitchen as I started making the congee. She came closer to me, then hugged me from behind.

"This smell is...Touya's egg congee...!"

So she was lured here by the scent... She always has liked this well-seasoned congee.

"Wait a bit longer. I'm making a lot, so there'll be enough for you too."

I didn't know how much the king would eat, so I was preparing a large portion. Even if he asked for seconds, there would be more than enough left over for Yukina.

"Eh heh heh." Yukina grinned as she rubbed her cheek against me.

"My, what a sweet brother you are," the princess interjected.

"Oh, sorry."

"Do not mind me," she responded, although she looked a bit sullen. I guess she was thinking about the state her own brother was in.

I let her watch me cook so she could be assured my food is safe to eat, but it looks like I ended up rubbing salt in her wounds.

“Actually, this just bolsters my conviction. That brother of mine is... Heh, hee hee hee...”

Surprisingly, she started laughing. *I guess she's fine after all?* Yukina was hugging onto me tighter now, as if she were scared. Rakti had also come over and started clinging to my waist.

“Um, I don't think Yukina and I are a good reference for how siblings should be,” I tried to advise, but I wasn't sure if she'd heard me.

I finished preparing the congee without further incident. The princess came back to her senses too and quickly took the food to the king. *I'll leave the rest of the king's affairs to her.*

We had just come back from a mission through the castle, so it was time to take a break. Just in case the king asked for seconds, I didn't dole out congee for anyone except Yukina—and also Rakti, who had seemed like she'd wanted some too. They asked if I was going to eat any, but I felt full enough just seeing them happily munching away.

I watched over them for a while, and around the same time that they'd both finished eating, the princess came back carrying an empty bowl.

“I cannot believe this!” She seemed rather agitated.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

“Why, just everything! When I brought the congee to my father, he...he was...!”

“U-Um, calm down...” Rakti pacified the princess enough to let us hear her out.

“My father was sharing stories from when I was little with Cosmos!”

It sounded like by the time the princess had brought the congee, Cosmos and the king had hit it off and were chatting up a storm with glasses of apple juice in hand.

“And he even talked about that time I...!” The princess was shaking. *What in the world did you talk about, Your Majesty? And what new information did you hear, Cosmos?*

It sounded like Foley had become dumbstruck, but she was still pouring more apple juice for the two of them. It was unclear if she had taken in everything that she'd heard.

I was surprised at Cosmos's social skills, but to the princess, it must have been horrifying to see the two of them live it up discussing stories from her childhood. Unfortunately for her, she may have been the only subject they had in common.

“Anyway, uh, does he want seconds?”

“No, thank you! He has gone to the bath! Arm in arm with Cosmos!”

I tried and failed to change the subject. *Try not to get too carried away, Cosmos.*

Come on, sacred king, leaving the princess like that... Well, I guess he couldn't take her with him to the bath.

Still upset, the princess clung on to Rakti in tears and started grumbling away. She must have been holding on to a lot of stress ever since Cosmos had been kidnapped.

The princess of Jupiter, whose city was home to the head temple of the Goddess of Light, was now crying in the Goddess of Darkness's arms. *Let's pretend I never saw this.*

Rakti, who was soothing the princess with a loving expression, really did look like a big sister right now. Though if I told her that, she would have puffed out her chest and returned to how she usually was, so I decided to stay silent and leave them be.

The princess finished grumbling after a while and seemed to return to high spirits. The sacred king had apparently finished taking his bath, so the princess and I went to meet him and explain our situation. The princess would do most of the talking, though: the king would trust her words more, even if we said the same thing. We headed to the lobby outside the large bath in the annex building.

"Aaahhh..."

"Aaahhh..."

We entered the lobby to find Cosmos and the sacred king reclining in massage chairs next to each other, letting out ragged sighs. The princess, upon seeing them, looked like she was about to pop a nerve.

"Haah... Father, do you have a moment?" Her tone was a little sharp.

"Mm? What is it...?" The king's voice vibrated since the massage chair was still on. The irritation emanating from the princess felt a little stronger. Even so, she stood in front of the king and started explaining our current situation. I stood to the side behind her.

After she began talking, the king turned off the massage chair and started listening intently. He was indeed shocked when he learned that the prince was the one who had drugged him. The king hung his head down, then Cosmos came to cheer him up. They really had gotten friendly.

Anyway, the king was finally able to take in what we had told him. But then, he looked at me with a dubious expression. "I understand what is happening now, but why is a Hero of the Goddess here?"

"To be honest, the distinctions you have for us don't really mean anything to me," I explained. "I don't see any reason for us to compete or fight against each other."

"But you view Ritsu as an enemy, do you not?"

“She became my enemy through her own actions.”

“I see.”

“Haruno is also here with us, and Kannami has gone with General Achilles into the city. Four of the five heroes are on our side.”

“Franchellis should be lauded for this.”

“Father, please save that for later...” the princess interrupted, her face red from embarrassment.

We haven't talked to him about the oracle or the demon lord yet, but we should save that for after we return to the castle.

“Can this clothing be worn before the people?” the king asked, pointing to the yukata as he arose from his massage chair.

“We wear them to festivals in my home country, but I don't think it would be fit for an official appearance...” I replied.

“Since it is clothing from another world, I can decree that it may be worn in official appearances.”

Is it that simple? Well, a single leaf is considered formal wear here. Maybe this is nothing in comparison.

“Are they to your liking? Personally, I'd rather they not get turned into formal wear...”

“Hmm, that is fair too. Very well.”

“In any case... I can offer some garments to you later.”

“Send me some in this pattern.” The king pointed to the yukata with the symbol of the Goddess of Light. *I should send him about ten of them. I want to get him on my side to talk about the temples for the six goddesses later.*

Anyway, the princess had actually made arrangements for the king's clothes already. She had ordered her guards to buy clothing at Ficus Brand earlier. It was several tiers below his normal attire, but it was enough for him to make a public appearance without embarrassment. The clothing had just gotten delivered, so we exited the room.

After a meal and a bath, the king had rested up, though I couldn't say if he had recovered completely yet. When he was done getting ready, we had to start moving too. I alerted Haruno and the rest, and we began our preparations.

We figured the prince wouldn't give up without a fight, so we dressed ourselves in full suits of armor. After I put on the Magic Eater, it felt like the imperial guards stood farther away from me than usual...but the magical armor did look scary, so I didn't hold it against them. Haruno and Clena stuck close to either of my sides, so that made up for it.

I'd wanted to use the magic axe, Crescent Moon, as my weapon, but it was way too powerful against humans, so I took the Hoshi-kiri instead. I kept silent about how this katana symbolized being the

demon lord's successor. In order to prevent any needless casualties, I decided to only strike with the back of the katana, and only when I had no other choice.

The sacred king had changed into formal attire, and he looked much more majestic now. He, the princess, and Cosmos formed a row in front of the castle gates along with the imperial guards. The rest of us, including soldiers that Kannami's party had brought with them when they'd returned, stood to the left and right sides of them.

Residents of the city surrounded us from a distance. I didn't mind having onlookers, but I didn't want them to come any closer. *This might get dangerous depending on how our opponents react.*

The guards standing before the gates were whispering something among themselves. They had probably realized that the sacred king had joined our side.

"I was expecting them to add reinforcements, but...there's no more guards here than before, huh?" I observed.

"Indeed. I have kept watch on them, but their number has not changed," Rulitora confirmed.

Does that mean that while we were giving the king time to rest, they didn't make any moves? No, they probably just didn't want to make it look like they were preparing for battle. To the citizens, that would make it seem like the prince is pointing his blade against the princess.

Maybe they're waiting with their swords at the ready behind the gate, and we just can't see them from here. We need to stay on alert. I let everyone know as such.

Ricott approached the gate by herself and raised her lance. "His Majesty the Sacred King has returned! Open the gates!"

Her declaration caused a stir among the guards. The prince may have ordered them to keep the gates closed, but between the prince and the sacred king, the latter obviously held higher authority. However, the prince was the one claiming the throne right now, and they had probably also heard that the sacred king was currently trapped sick in bed.

In any case, they continued not to make any moves. *Isn't it about time that they either open the gates or launch a counterattack? Do they need to wait for someone who can make that decision?*

"Maybe they're wondering if His Majesty is the real deal," Haruno commented.

"If that's the case...then that's Touya's fault," Clena said.

Hmm, I see. We'd managed to take the king with us without hardly anyone spotting us, let alone causing a commotion. Maybe they haven't even noticed that the king is gone yet. Perhaps they're finally panicking inside the castle right now, trying to confirm the king's whereabouts.

That could be my fault, then. My bad, I apologized silently.

“Well, they won’t open the gates for us as long as the prince refuses to surrender,” Clena said, looking up at the castle. She was right. Since the king was on our side now, the prince couldn’t back out anymore.

Indeed—we weren’t here to make them open the gate for us. We were doing this to force the prince to decline and make it clear that he was rebelling against the king.

We waited a while longer, then the first on our side to make a move was Clena.

“O Wind!” She unsheathed the Yoshimitsu and unleashed spirits that fended off an arrow shot in Ricott’s direction. The arrow came from a soldier in a watchtower above the gate. Clena had been looking up, so she had been the first to notice the attack.

We had foreseen the possibility that they would try a surprise attack on us using bows and arrows. We’d had our bases covered.

Now it was clear: the prince was declaring hostility against the sacred king. I ran up before Ricott and raised my shield in front of her. A second later, several arrows showered down on us from the watchtower.

“Are you okay?!”

“Ah... Yes!” Ricott had been taken aback, still holding her lance. We had planned to defend against their first strike either by using magic or by having her fend it off with her own lance. She had probably intended to guard herself.

My role was to defend against the follow-up attacks while wearing the Magic Eater. A rain of arrows was showering down on us, but not a single one hit its target.

“Unlimited Bullet!” In the meantime, Cosmos summoned two handguns and aimed them at the bowmen in the watchtower. They wouldn’t go down so easily, though. The soldiers in the watchtower hid themselves behind the battlement walls, then creaks resounded in the air as they opened the castle gates. The gates revealed a horde of soldiers waiting behind them.

So the prince gathered an army after all.

Cosmos fired a stream of bullets into the watchtower. Ricott backed off to protect the princess and the sacred king. In her place, the Torano’o warriors and the soldiers that Kannami’s party had gathered moved to the front.

“Uwaarrhh!”

I had assumed the Torano’o warriors would attack first, but something that looked like a crimson cannonball flung itself past the gates with a thunderous roar. That was Kannami’s shoulder tackle, and that alone was enough to send a few soldiers flying. Kannami stood before them with crimson light radiating from both his

shoulders, which distorted the air like an open flame. A low rumbling sound was coming from him. The guards cowered in fear—and Kannami wasn't the type to let that opening go.

"Yaaargh!" His roundhouse kick drew a crimson arc through the air and sent another several soldiers flying. More soldiers swarmed around him to attack, but Kannami took them out one by one with his own arms and legs.

"So that's Kannami's gift!" I exclaimed.

He had never used it during his training, so it was my first time seeing it. I'd heard the stories, but it was incredible seeing it with my own eyes.

That was the gift that had bested even the Beast King, a demon general. The gift did just one thing: it amplified the user's own power by an unlimited amount. Its name was Unlimited Engine.

The gift gave Kannami power by enveloping him in an aura like a crimson flame, and it made sounds like an engine revving up. However, it had one severe flaw—it didn't offer any protection against its own knockback effects. To a normal person, vigorous exercise was enough to create muscle pain, so it wasn't hard to imagine what might happen to a person's body after using power that was amplified an unlimited amount.

But Kannami had trained his body during his travels. He had obtained a body that could withstand the strain that his own gift gave him. He had become strong enough to defeat a demon general, which was nothing short of awe-inspiring.

Kannami continued his rampage into the castle. Soldiers had been lying in wait within, but he struck them down one after another.

The Torano'o warriors followed behind him, and now the gates were completely under our control. The soldiers that Kannami's party had gathered came in to guard the gates so that no harm would extend into the city.

"Ha ha ha! Don't hog all the fun!" Next, Cosmos jumped in, not intending to give up the spotlight. *Try not to cause any friendly fire.*

"Touya, we'll take over the watchtower!" Haruno called out to me. She took Sera, Sandra, Rin, and Lumis with her inside the castle.

"Touya, we'll take a look around the aqueduct. There may be people trying to escape," Clena said, and she took Roni, Brahms, and Mem with her.

Right, the prince might try to escape in this situation. We have to prepare to deal with that too. I left it in Clena's hands.

"Okay, we're going too!" I took Prae, Rium, Yukina, Rakti, and Daisy into the castle with me. We had one job: to bring the sacred king and the princess to meet the prince.

The inside of the castle was already in mayhem. Kannami and

Cosmos were wreaking havoc, and the Torano'o warriors weren't far behind either.

"Dokutora, keep the soldiers in check! Rulitora, come with me!" I shouted my orders.

"Aye, leave it to me!" Dokutora responded with a loud laugh as he swung his spear.

"I will bring a unit with me!" Rulitora ran toward me with a group of four warriors in tow.

"We need to secure a route to the throne room! Let's go!" I continued.

"As you command!"

"You got it!" Prae chimed in.

We weren't going to charge in all at once, since that wouldn't ensure a safe route for the sacred king and princess following behind us. Rulitora, Prae, and I led our procession, and Rium and Yukina backed us up with magic. The four Torano'o warriors protected Rakti and Daisy in the back while also keeping our surroundings in check.

Farther behind them, the imperial guards were protecting the sacred king and the princess, so I didn't have to worry about them. With Rulitora leading the way, we made careful and steady progress through the castle.

"It doesn't look like all of the soldiers here are under the effects of Nakahana's gift..." I said as I used the back of the Hoshi-kiri to knock out an oncoming soldier.

I looked toward the courtyard to see Kannami caught up in a fierce battle against four soldiers who looked like knights. The knights were moving differently from the other soldiers. They were probably under the influence of Nakahana's Unlimited Love.

Though it was taking four of them, they were keeping up a fight against Kannami, who had defeated the Beast King. Those knights were definitely powered up.

Kannami wasn't backing down either, though. The Unlimited Engine made a booming sound as he tackled the four knights.

I looked more closely and saw that Achilles and the Beast King were surrounded by other knights. The Beast King in particular was surrounded by dozens of them, including some ordinary-looking soldiers, perhaps because they were taking extra caution against a demi-human.

That shouldn't be everyone under the influence of Unlimited Love, though. If it were, they'd be going after us trying to get to the throne room, not just Kannami. I'm willing to bet that there are more of them around somewhere.

"Rulitora."

"Understood."

I didn't have to explain any further. I cautiously opened doors and parried attempts at surprise attacks from oncoming soldiers, and we made our way through the castle until we found a staircase going to the second floor.

I thought back to when I'd had an audience with the sacred king. I had gone up from here, then straight down the hallway, then went inside the antechamber before the throne room. There was a high chance that soldiers were lying in wait ahead. But before that...

"Summon spirit." I chanted in a low voice and summoned light spirits. I told everyone to look away for a moment, then pointed with my finger to tell the light spirits where to go. Five spheres of light floated up the stairs to the second floor. Then, the moment I turned my back to them, all the spheres emitted an intense light at the same time.

"Gwah?!"

"My eyes! My eeeyyes!"

"Okay, we're going up!" I shouted.

The moment we heard the screams, we rushed forward. We dodged soldiers tumbling down the staircase as we headed to the second floor, then, when we reached the top, found about a dozen soldiers covering their eyes while rolling on the floor. *So, they really had been waiting for us.*

Rulitora and the four warriors followed right behind me and subdued the soldiers before I could blink.

"Don't let your guard down!" I yelled out, prompting everyone to be on alert. Rulitora and the others raised their heads and stood on guard again, and then a door opened to a flood of soldiers rushing at us. *Just as I thought.*

I figured that they would have heard the screams from just now and moved to attack. Two people who looked like knights led the group who just came out the door, and a dozen or so soldiers followed. The knights were in full armor, but neither of them was wearing a helmet. They were both young men who looked a bit over twenty years old. Their elegant faces contorted as they ran toward us. Their expressions were clearly different from the soldiers—there was hostility against us in their eyes. *I bet they're both under the effects of Unlimited Love.*

"Rulitora! You take the right!" I yelled, and without waiting for a reply, I charged toward the knight on the left. I struck my shield out at him, but the knight nimbly dodged and then slashed at my side, which was unguarded. It had no effect, though—the Magic Eater negated his attack.

Rulitora moved in on the other knight in the meantime. The other soldiers tried to find an opening to rush him, but the four Torano'o

warriors and Prae overpowered them.

It's okay, they can handle themselves. I need to focus on what's in front of me.

As if he were confident that he could cut through metal armor, the knight repeatedly slashed at me. His attacks were swift, fast enough that I couldn't keep up with my own sword.

If this was his raw strength, then he would have been strong enough to win against Kannami from before his travels. *I've never heard of someone as strong as that in Jupiter, so this must be the power of Unlimited Love.*

I wouldn't let him get the best of me, though. No matter how sharp his strikes were, they were rendered powerless against the Magic Eater.

If I couldn't win in dexterity, then I had to use brute force. I thrust my shield out, and when the knight repelled it, I stepped forward. He attacked me again immediately afterward, but I ignored it and kept advancing.

He kept aiming for my head as if he were trying to make me pass out, but it was a futile effort. As long as I still had MP, I couldn't feel a single attack of his inside this armor. It was loud, though.

I kept pushing forward, then managed to grab his left arm and pushed it against the wall.

"You traitor...!" He kicked my abdomen, but it had no effect. I didn't flinch. I continued to press his left arm against the wall, summoned earth spirits, and warped the wall so that it bound his arm to it.

"Wha...?! What are you...?!"

Before the knight could reposition himself, I pressed my free hand against the wall and summoned earth spirits again, then hardened the warped wall to make sure his left arm was trapped.

The knight's eyes were spinning at the sudden development. I used the chance to trap both of his legs too. Then I trapped his right hand holding his sword and knocked it out of his hand.

No matter how skilled with a sword he was, there was no way he could break free of restraints made from stone. *I may have destroyed a wall to accomplish this, but it was a necessary sacrifice.*

I looked back at the others, and they were already done dealing with the rest of the knights and soldiers. Two of the Torano'o warriors were each bleeding heavily from an arm and shoulder. *I should focus on them before all the more minor injuries.*

I immediately began casting Healing Light on them. The speed at which their wounds healed up was a world of difference compared to when I had healed Clena's burns. *Okay, their wounds are all closed up now. Everyone else looks fine too.* After that, I also used earth spirits to

pin the knight Rulitora had faced to the wall.

I called out to the sacred king's group at the bottom of the stairs, saying that it was safe now, and then we continued down the hallway.

"Touya!"

We reconvened with Haruno's group right outside the antechamber, where the hallway merged with one going left and right. Apparently, no one in the watchtower had been under the effects of Unlimited Love, so they had been able to conquer the tower pretty quickly.

"I guess there aren't enough of them to put them all over the castle," I said.

"Maybe their main force is among the army traveling with Nakahana," Haruno replied.

So, the few knights under the effects of Unlimited Love were stationed to guard the throne room and to fight against Kannami. I guess their priorities made sense.

There were four soldiers in front of the door to the throne room in the antechamber, but they had already lost their will to fight. Rulitora pointed his glaive at them, and they promptly dropped their weapons and surrendered.

I stayed on alert, thinking that they might be hiding knives, but that wasn't the case. I also considered trapping them on the wall like I had done with the knights earlier, but they didn't seem like huge threats, so we used ropes to tie them up instead.

In the meantime, the sacred king's group caught up to us. Some soldiers had chased them down and had attempted to attack them, but thanks to the imperial guards, they had gotten by with hardly any injuries. Actually, one of the guards' arms was wrapped in a cloth that was now soaked red.

"Were you not able to heal her?" I asked.

"No, the guard who can use cleric magic went with Cosmos..."

"I see. Let me take a look then."

I unwrapped the bloody cloth and cast Healing Light. Then, I checked if any of the other guards were heavily injured. It turned out that three more were, so Sera and I immediately went to heal them as well.

Rulitora and the others stood watch in the meantime, but there was no movement from within the throne room.

"Did they escape?" I wondered.

"No, I sense people inside," Rulitora said.

So they're still waiting inside, huh? It had taken us a few minutes to treat the injured, so maybe the people inside were getting impatient wondering when we would enter. *Part of me wants to keep them waiting a bit longer, but if the sacred king and the prince settle things here, the*

battles happening within the castle will come to an end too. We should enter as soon as we can.

"I'll go first," I said.

The entrance was a double door. I didn't push open both doors at once but instead slightly opened the door on the right and stepped inside.

At the same time, I heard the twang of bowstrings. I brought my left arm holding my shield over my face, and not a moment later, a multitude of arrows rained down on me.

That figures. If they were waiting for us, they would have prepared at least this much. I peeked out from behind my shield and saw four bowmen drawing their next shots.

"Spirit summon! Now, Rulitora!"

I summoned wind spirits. The people inside shielded their faces against the sudden gust of wind, then Rulitora and the others used the opening to invade.

The bowmen tried to draw their next shots again, but it was too late. Rulitora kicked down the left door, swung his glaive, and sent the four bowmen flying to the walls and pillars of the room.

The four Torano'o warriors congregated around Rulitora, and Haruno and the others joined me inside the room.

I looked around the throne room and saw that, on top of the bowmen who had been waiting from the front, four knights had also been lying in wait on either side of the entrance. They must have planned to surround us after the arrow attack, but they hadn't been able to react in time to Rulitora's intrusion, then the others in our group surrounded me right after, so they missed their chance.

"Ricott, there are four knights on either side. You take the left."

"Understood!"

Ricott took three imperial guards inside with her, and then my group focused on the knights on the right.

Then, the sacred king himself entered the room, walking between my and Ricott's groups. The princess walked beside him, and the rest of the imperial guards formed a protective circle around them.

Facing them was the prince sitting on the throne. There were three knights close beside him.

The prince stood up from the throne, seemingly irritated, and looked down at the king. The knights around him drew their swords, which made the princess's imperial guards stand on guard in response. The sacred king didn't even flinch, however, and continued to stare straight at the prince.

The sacred king and the prince—the parent and child—finally faced each other.

"You fool! What came over you to do all this...?!" The first to

spark the confrontation was the sacred king. His words were soaked in anger, and his clenched fists were shaking.

The princess had explained Nakahana's gift to him, but I was betting that hadn't been enough for him to excuse the prince. I couldn't blame the sacred king for being confused, though: the prince was the rightful successor to the throne, so he would have claimed it eventually even if he hadn't done anything. This incident risked the prince losing the throne instead.

However, the prince didn't falter. In fact, he chuckled at the king and extravagantly shrugged his shoulders while shaking his head, as if to say the king didn't understand a thing. "What in the world are you saying, father? We are to aid the heroes. That is our role—nay, our *duty*—as the ones who summoned them."

That almost made sense since the sacred family was supposed to take responsibility for the summoning, but it wasn't his argument to make as the one who had kidnapped Cosmos. The sacred king pointed that out too, but the prince just continued to twist his argument.

"All of us! And all of the heroes! We must all gather under Ritsu! And thereupon, Jupiter shall take rule of the Olympus Alliance!" The prince rambled on, seemingly elated by what he was saying. It sounded like he was convinced that his assertions were righteous.

Take rule of the Olympus Alliance, though? What an outrageous argument.

Had Nakahana "taught" him that ambition, or was it something that he'd always had? I didn't know, but there was one thing I could say for sure now: there was no way we were going to get through to him like this. I had thought that if Nakahana wasn't here, maybe his own family could set him straight, but I had been too optimistic.

"Touya, let's take care of the ones here first," Haruno suggested, having probably come to the same conclusion I'd had.

Okay, it's time for plan B. As the sacred king and the prince quarreled with each other, we quietly made our moves.

"If they try to counterattack, please shield me," Haruno said as she sheathed her sword, then walked up to the knights facing us. They seemed confused at her actions since they pointed their swords at her but didn't move any further.

When Haruno came within arm's reach of the knights, I drew the Hoshi-kiri and took a step forward. Maybe they thought Haruno was a decoy since they immediately turned to face me instead. *Good reactions. But too bad for you—I'm the decoy.*

"Hi-yah!" Haruno used their lapse in attention to deliver a chop to the back of a knight's head.

"Huh?! What are you doing?!" The knight was surprised by her sudden aggression. The other three knights pointed their swords at

Haruno in confusion, and then I stepped up to shield her.

“Yah! Yah! Hi-yah!” Haruno was faster, though. She delivered chops to the three remaining knights in succession. She spun around and stepped back to join me, then drew her sword again.



Then, the first knight who had been chopped stopped in his tracks and started looking around him. He looked confused...or maybe shocked.

“What was I...? Your Majesty...Your Highness... Is this treason?! No, what is happening?!” He must have been at a loss, unable to make sense of his situation. The other three were now reacting in a similar manner. But there was no way that they could understand what had just happened—that the Harunon Chop that they had just received was actually her Unlimited Reflection.

Either she had grown or it was the power of the Goddess of Wind, but her Unlimited Reflection was now powerful enough to not only reflect everything that used MP but vanquish it as well. Basically, Haruno could erase all the effects of Nakahana’s gift.

We couldn’t tell how much of their memories each person retained. However, even if they remembered their own actions, their primary motivator, their “love for Nakahana,” had now disappeared. They could remember what they’d done but not why they’d done it. So they couldn’t understand why they had made all those decisions... It was kind of scary to think about.

I understood why Haruno had rejoined me, though. The knights at least realized that they had committed treason against the king. Even if they couldn’t remember why they’d done it, they knew what fate lay ahead for those who had committed treason. There was the possibility that they would give in to desperation and keep retaliating, thinking there was no turning back. So Haruno didn’t let her guard down and came back to us.

If only there were some way that we could placate them... I looked over to the sacred king, and my eyes met with Princess Franchellis. She gave me a nod, then announced in a voice loud enough to drown out both her father and her brother: “Everyone! We understand that you have been controlled by Ritsu’s powers! However, it is not too late! If you surrender now, you will not be punished for your deeds!”

Her voice echoed within the throne room. Everyone turned their attention to the princess, and even the sacred king and the prince stopped their squabble. Silence filled the room for a moment.

The princess really knew the right moves to make. That was exactly what I had been searching for: a way to ensure the knights’ safety after they’d surrendered. Sure enough, the knights facing us lowered their swords in relief after they’d heard the princess’s words.

A second later, clangs of metal hitting the floor broke the silence. I turned toward the sounds to see Ricott’s group taken aback, the figure of Haruno with her hand in a chopping pose, and four knights cowering down with their hands over their heads. She had taken

advantage of the moment everyone's attention was on the princess to deliver Harunon Chops to the knights that had been facing Ricott's group. *I knew I could trust in Haruno's sharp wits.*

The four knights that Ricott's group had been keeping in check also surrendered. All the knights who had been waiting by the entrance were now incapacitated. If we took over the places where they had been stationed, we now had control over about a third of the entrance to the throne room. It wasn't huge, but it was enough for us to protect either side of the sacred king's group as he stepped up slightly ahead of us.

The debate between the sacred king and the prince had started up again. The prince claimed that our surprise attack was cowardly, and the king argued back that the knights had made the right decision to not concede to the rebellion.

Well now, was our surprise attack or his kidnapping more cowardly? I'd wanted to ask him, but I held back, since I figured I shouldn't stick my head into another family's argument.

I had hoped that the other knights and soldiers here would surrender all at once too, but it didn't go that smoothly. I could guess why the knights hadn't forfeited yet, but what about the soldiers? I thought Unlimited Love had only been used on a portion of the knights. The princess was now whispering something into the king's ear. She had probably realized the same thing: all the soldiers here, not just the knights, might be under the effects of Unlimited Love.

Of all the opponents we had fought up until now, only the knights had been particularly strong, so Rulitora and I alone had been enough to deal with them. If everyone here was on the same level, that was a different story. The Torano'o warriors and the princess's imperial guards wouldn't be able to hold up against them. Even Sandra and the others would have it rough.

Everyone continued watching the debate between the sacred king and the prince, but the prince showed no signs of backing down yet. They would either continue forever, or the king would run out of perseverance first. That wasn't an option for the sacred king, but he didn't have much stamina right now since he had just woken up from a long slumber. We had to do something while he was still holding up.

I took a few steps back from the front line, trusting it to Rulitora, then called out to the knights who had just been chopped back to their senses.

"Do you all realize now that you weren't yourselves back there?"

"...Yeah, I guess."

All right, they might still be confused, but they could think for themselves now. I could ask them a few questions.

"To make sure... Is everyone here under the effects of Nakahana's

gift? Not just the knights, but the soldiers too?"

"Yeah, everyone here is an elite selected by Lady—um, by Ritsu Nakahana."

He had probably called her Lady Ritsu without question while he had been brainwashed. He didn't have the will to call her that anymore, so his own thoughts and words must have been disorienting for him. Anyway, now we'd confirmed that all the soldiers here were also under the effects of Unlimited Love.

"I'm sure you already know, but we have a way to bring everyone back to their senses."

"The chop?"

"The chop."

Well, a simple touch should have been enough to negate the effects of Unlimited Love, but I didn't question Haruno about it. *If the knights had been wearing helmets, she would have gone about it a different way. I think.*

Considering everything we had seen until now, Nakahana's standard for selecting her elite was facial appearance, which would normally be covered by a helmet. Maybe the reason why none of the knights were wearing helmets was because Nakahana had told them not to. In conclusion, it was an unavoidable fate for the Harunon Chop to be used here.

Okay, I need to get my thoughts in order. The current situation isn't in our favor. Though that's still counting the condition that we want to win while preventing casualties on both sides.

Our surprise attack against the eight knights succeeded, but now everyone else is on alert. The rest of our opponents have their attention on not just the sacred king and the prince's argument, but on us as well.

If we want to incapacitate the rest, we have no choice but to charge at them head-on. To be frank, we won't be able to hold back if it comes to that. If all the soldiers are as strong as the knights we just fought, we'll suffer injuries by holding back. If it comes down to it, well, I'll personally dispose of them.

I consider that a form of us giving up, though. I want to exhaust all our possibilities first before resorting to that, since even then it wouldn't be too late. Think, just think. How can we incapacitate everyone without killing them?

The sacred king looked drained now. Maybe he had realized that he couldn't convince the prince to change his mind, and the realization that his efforts were in vain crashed down on him. He was leaning against the princess like he was barely able to stand. Their debate would finally end when one of them broke the stalemate. I had to think of something before then.

“Can you lend us your help? We need your cooperation to prevent casualties on both sides,” I asked the knights.

“If it’s to prevent casualties, sure.”

Not only the original knight who had answered me, but the seven other knights whom Haruno had chopped also agreed to lend us their support.

“When I returned to my senses, all my reprehensible words and shameful actions...they all came back and sent a shiver down my spine! Aahh...!”

“And His Highness is still consumed by that influence!”

I see, so that’s one of the reasons why they want to stop the prince. I hadn’t thought about that. If that’s their motivation, I think I can trust them.

That was about all we could do right now to strengthen our forces. Next was the question of how we should play our cards. *Time to rack my brain and think.*

We had gained control of only about a third of the entrance of the throne room, while the prince still controlled the rest. The bowmen guarded the path to the throne, and there were five knights wielding swords standing on either side of them. The prince sat on the throne itself, and guarding him were three of his seemingly most elite knights wearing extravagant armor. All of them were under the effects of Nakahana’s gift.

The throne room was wide enough for about twenty people to line up with enough room in between them to swing their swords. It was more than spacious enough to be used as a reception room, but it was far too cramped for a large number of people to battle inside. *If we rush them now, we could probably get as far as incapacitating the bowmen, but we won’t be able to avoid a physical battle against the rest after that.*

The knights on our side wanted to stop their comrades from committing further wrongdoings without bringing them harm. The knights on the opposing side were convinced that they were being righteous and that anyone who would try to stop them was the enemy. If they fought, a significant number of casualties would result—needless to say, on our side. *Yeah, we can’t just charge at them head-on. We need to use some other method.*

“Daisy, I’m counting on you.” I whispered my plan to Daisy, who had brought herself close enough to my face so that only she could hear what I was saying.

“Gotcha, leave it to me.”

We made our preparations quietly and out of the prince’s view. I couldn’t move around much since the Magic Eater was so conspicuous, so I had Daisy fly around for me.

She relayed my message to Rulitora and the other Torano'o warriors first, then to Prae. After that, she sent it to the eight knights. The knights subtly shifted position to face their brainwashed comrades, and Rulitora and Prae shifted to hide me from view.

"Snap out of it, you guys!" one of the eight knights suddenly shouted. He was addressing not the prince, but the knights guarding him. The other seven knights also started calling out to them after being spurred on by the first one.

As one would expect, their pleas fell on deaf ears since the opposing knights were convinced that they were in the right. Conversely, the brainwashed knights yelled back, saying that the knights on *our* side were the ones who needed to come back to their senses.

I see—the knights are doing this to divert attention from the rest of us making our preparations. This hadn't been part of my plan, but I was thankful for it.

Even the prince had begun to ignore the sacred king and had started arguing with the knights instead. The sacred king leaned against the princess, obviously exhausted at this point.

Yukina, Rakti, and Rium came over to me amid the commotion. They had heard my plan too. I discreetly opened the door to the Unlimited Bath behind me, just wide enough that I would have been able to squeeze through it. I was hidden behind Rulitora's and Prae's large bodies, so no one else should've been able to see me do so. The three girls started getting ready inside the Bath, and then Haruno came over to me while crouching. Daisy was with her.

"Did you hear everything from Daisy? Do you think you can do it?" I asked, and Haruno responded with a hesitant nod. *I know it's a little nerve-racking, but it's not too crazy of a plan, so I'm hoping you can pull it off.*

After a while, Daisy flew over to me and whispered "They're done" into my ear. *That's faster than I had expected. I guess they split up the work to get everything done as soon as they could.*

"Haruno," I signaled.

"I'm ready, go for it!" Haruno seemed prepared. She stepped between Rulitora and me.

Then, Yukina and Rium hoisted something out of the Unlimited Bath. It was the hose that I had bought once upon a time in Jupiter.

The hose was connected to the water fountain right past the door, where Rakti was standing. It wasn't any old hose anymore—the end had been equipped with a nozzle that was specially designed by Rium and the ketolts.

The nozzle itself was also fitted with a shampoo bottle. It was easy to guess where this was headed—this nozzle was designed to spray

soapy water. It even had foaming capabilities.

I didn't know all the details, but the ketolts had only been able to design the nozzle to mix shampoo and water, and then Rium could use crystal magic to make it foam up. That meant that the nozzle required MP to activate, but the two girls were more than capable enough to handle it.

"Fire away! Rakti!" I shouted.

I heard a faint "Okay!" from beyond the door, and at the same time, I summoned earth spirits below my feet. Then, Rulitora, still clutching his glaive, dashed forth with Haruno behind him as if they were sliding across the ground. However, they had gone sideways.

"Take this!" Yukina yelled energetically, then fired a torrent of soapy water into the space where Rulitora had just been standing.

The knights couldn't react to the sudden attack in time and were bathed in enough foam to empty out an entire shampoo bottle. On top of that, the floor was now covered in a layer of white foam thick enough to bury their feet.

The foam had clearly gotten in some of their eyes, as they had dropped their weapons and were now covering their eyes. Some of them had started yelling in pain too. Their rule to not wear helmets had shot them in the foot.

The remaining ones had been surprised by the sudden shower, but they still tried to retaliate. One of them tried running toward Rulitora, who was now off to the side.

"Dwah?!"

However, he fell over dramatically. The floor in this room had no carpet, just a smooth and glossy marble-like rock, so it was only natural they would trip with soap suds everywhere.

The other knights fully grasped their situation now and didn't try to move any farther. By that time, Rulitora and Haruno had reached the end of the wall.

"I don't know what you're trying to do, but it won't happen!" After realizing that he couldn't run, one of the knights threw his sword instead. It was too late, though. The next moment, Rulitora and Haruno went up in the air, and the sword made a clattering sound as it hit the wall and dropped to the ground.

I bet they won't be able to keep up with the quick turn of events. Rulitora and Haruno were now on a pedestal that had grown from the ground. Both that and their initial sideways dash were the work of the makeshift elevator I had created using earth spirits.

The makeshift elevator rose about two stutes from the ground, then continued along the wall deeper inside the room at lightning speed. The three elite knights also threw their swords, but one of them missed, and Rulitora blocked the other two.

“Take down the spell caster!”

“Not on my watch!”

One of the knights threw his sword at me, but Prae knocked it to the ground.

“Wh-What are you all doing?! Don’t let them get any closer!” The prince also commanded his knights to intercept as he took in the sudden development. That order was too little too late, though. Rium had already finished changing out the empty shampoo bottle for a new one.

The bowmen and the knights on their left who hadn’t been bathed in foam yet moved to attack, but Yukina and Rium anticipated that and sprayed them in foam as well. The bowmen weren’t able to cover themselves since they had been drawing their arrows, and all of them got the suds in their eyes. Unable to withstand the pain, some of them fired their arrows in random directions. *Whoops—one of those arrows went into the arm of a knight. Thank god they were pointing their bows at Rulitora. If an arrow had flown toward the sacred king, we’d have been in big trouble.*

The remaining foam was sprayed at the knights on the left side, and then Rium switched the shampoo bottle out for a third one without skipping a beat.

The knights on the left hadn’t been covered in as much foam as the ones on the right, but seeing one of their comrades trip had formed a mental barrier that prevented them from moving immediately. That hesitation bought more than enough time for us. Rulitora and Haruno had already reached the end of the room at this point.

“Be gone!” Rulitora sprang onto the three knights surrounding the prince. True to their ranks as elites, they were able to react in time. Even Rulitora might have had some trouble taking down just one of them. However, all we needed was for him to buy us a few seconds of time.

Haruno spotted an opening and jumped out from behind Rulitora. One of the elites noticed her and tried to stop her, but Rulitora moved to block him. Haruno closed in on the prince, and none of the other elites could stop her now. She swung a chopping hand down at the prince’s head...

“Naive!”

...but the prince nimbly dodged. He was under the effects of Nakahana’s gift too. We were expecting him to be as agile as the other knights.

“Yeah, we saw that coming too!” I summoned earth spirits again. This time, I distorted the ground underneath the prince’s feet.

“Wha?!”

I anticipated where the prince would jump to, then disfigured the ground there so that he would lose balance. No matter how agile he was, there was no way he could outmaneuver this. The prince lost his balance and tripped over the ground. What awaited him in the direction he'd fallen...was Haruno.

"Unlimited Reflection!"

The prince had no way to dodge the palm of Haruno's hand. His body sprang up for a moment, then fell to the ground with a thud, like a puppet that had just had its strings cut.

"O-Oh no! Did he hit his head?! Someone check!" I shouted, which made the three knights snap out of their stupor and run to the prince with their backs facing Rulitora. *All right, they fell for it.*

"Hi-yah!" Without delay, Haruno delivered a chop to the back of each of the three knights' heads. They looked around in confusion as they returned to their senses.

Okay, we've managed to incapacitate the prince and his three elites. Now all that's left is the rest of the knights and bowmen who are covered in foam and can't move right now. Checkmate. There's a chance that they'll still put up a fight, but we just have to stay on alert.

"We'll keep the bowmen in check, so restrain the knights first!" I called for everyone to subdue the knights as we sprayed more foam on the bowmen.

The knights, having thrown their weapons already, tried to fight with their bare hands until the end. But they were practically powerless now, and we were able to restrain them one by one. We went to tie up the bowmen next, and in the meantime, Sera's group took the sacred king and the princess to the prince.

Sera checked the prince's condition. He seemed uninjured, and around the same time we tied up the last bowman, he woke back up. He immediately grabbed a fallen sword next to him and tried to take his own life, but the sacred king, the princess, and the three elite knights hurriedly stopped him. *I guess he retained all of his memories...*

It looked like he was in good hands, so I decided to keep what I'd just seen to myself since I assumed it wasn't something an outsider should have witnessed.

Next, Haruno chopped the heads of all the knights and bowmen. The effects of the gift were now dispelled from them, and the battle in the throne room finally came to an end.

Everyone seemed to retain their memories and was reacting in different ways—some were holding their hands over their heads, while others faced the ceiling and cried out. I didn't want to deal with them now, though. I gave the first eight knights the task of placating the others.

The battles occurring throughout the rest of the castle weren't

over yet. Ricott took some imperial guards with her to deliver the message that the prince had surrendered and that the battle had ended. There were still people under the effects of Nakahana's gift in the castle, so Haruno and I left to find them. Sera and the rest remained in the throne room to treat the injured. As for the prince... I decided to leave him to his family. That wasn't a problem that an outsider should try to butt into.

When we left the throne room, we first went back to the knights I had trapped on the wall and brought them back to their senses, then released them. Their faces had gone pale, so we tossed them into the throne room, then headed to the courtyard.

The fights in the courtyard had already ended, and light clerics had come to treat the injured. Kannami's party was keeping the struggling knights constrained. The effects of the gift had yet to wear off, and they were still trying to put up a fight.

Haruno went up to each knight and dispelled the gift. They immediately turned still and gave off blank stares. *Stay like that and let us treat your injuries too.*

We spotted Cosmos, but he seemed to be in a hurry transporting the injured, so I didn't call out to him. *There sure are a lot of injured people, though. The battles throughout the castle must have been rough.*

"I wonder if Dokutora and his group are okay..." I wondered.

"Go look for them, Touya. I'll be fine on my own," Haruno urged.

"No, the knights are still trying to fight back, so it'll be dangerous for you."

"We will keep Lady Haruno safe," Rulitora assured me.

"I'm here too!" Prae added.

Rulitora, the Torano'o warriors, and Prae volunteered themselves to protect Haruno. As a wind cleric, Prae could also treat the wounded.

"Got it. I'll leave it to you then."

I left Haruno in their care, then asked Yukina and Daisy to search from above. Soon after, Yukina said that she saw Dokutora and his team in a corner of the courtyard. We approached them and found that they were all wounded as well. Fortunately, none of them had died in battle thanks to their tough skin.

"Where are the clerics?" I asked.

"They're prioritizing the heavily injured ones," Dokutora responded.

Their thick skins also meant that they had to wait to be treated, so it had both its positives and its negatives. *I guess the clerics have their hands full right now, so I'll treat them myself.*

Since they had been fighting in the courtyard, they were covered in dirt. I opened the door to the Unlimited Bath and washed away the

dirt first, then started to heal them. Apparently, that brought us some attention, since the clerics started coming up to me and asking if they could use the water too. I recognized most of them from my stay at the light temple. I had plenty of MP left, so I let them take as much as they needed for their treatments.

“Rakti, can you help? I’ll be treating Dokutora and everyone else here.”

“Leave it to me!”

Rakti went to get the hose, and I concentrated on treating the Torano’o warriors. The clerics kept going to Rakti nonstop. I wondered what they would think if they knew that the one giving them water was the Goddess of Darkness. *Now isn’t the time, though. I should save that for another day.*

After I finished treating everyone in the courtyard, Clena’s group came back from the aqueduct. They brought two people whom they had tied up and gagged with them.

“Who are they?” I asked.

“We found them trying to escape the castle,” Clena answered.

I looked over the two escapees. One of the two was a knight wearing armor but no helmet, and the other was dressed in ornate clothing instead of armor. Both of them looked young, about the same age as the prince. “I’ll ask just to be sure, but how were they behaving?”

“Like they were under the effects of the gift.”

Apparently, they had been trying to deliver a message to Nakahana that the castle was under attack. *I see, so they tried to slip away to deliver the message to Nakahana while their comrades were waiting for us in the throne room. It was the right choice for Clena’s group to scout out any escape routes.*

“More importantly, can you treat Brahms?” Clena asked.

So, they hadn’t been able to get by without any injuries either... They had already given him emergency treatment, but the cloth wrapped around his arm had become soaked red. It didn’t look like a shallow wound.

“I’ll get on that. How about the others?” I asked.

“They’re all fine,” Clena confirmed. “Though that’s only because Brahms protected us.”

“I see... You should take those two to Haruno. She’ll erase the gifts from them.”

“Got it. Yukina, can you lend me a hand? These two keep resisting and refusing to move.”

“Okay, I’ll drag them along,” Yukina replied.

The two captives were dragged away to where Haruno was. Brahms’s injury indeed wasn’t light, but I was able to heal it

immediately.

We continued helping the clerics treat the rest of the injured and didn't return to the throne room. I naturally didn't want to just leave the wounded be, and helping out came with the added bonus of letting me avoid getting wrapped up in the affairs of the sacred family. I left that last part unsaid, though.

The cleanup was actually more exhausting than the battle itself. But thanks to Clena capturing the two would-be messengers, we had managed to free the sacred king and return order to the Sacred Capital without letting Nakahana know. Just in case, I checked with the knight after he returned to his senses, and he said that there were no other messengers.

I had used up a large amount of MP by now and had gotten tired, so it was about time I stopped and took a break for today. Ricott had dropped by and told us that officially, they would claim that nothing had happened inside the castle today.

The sacred family had apparently started a family meeting. I didn't know what would happen with the prince, but that was their family's problem, so I didn't think about it for now. Also, the reason why Ricott had dropped by was because she had been searching for Cosmos.

"Would Cosmos be of any help..." I questioned.

"I was hoping that he could at least be by Princess Franchellis's side..."

So they want him there as emotional support...

Anyway, if they want to claim that nothing happened today, it'd be a bad look to keep so many Torano'o warriors inside the castle, so...

"We're going to visit the light temple," I said.

"Understood. I will call for you again at a later time." Ricott seemed to understand what I was getting at. I assumed she'd contact me again when the family meeting was over.

"Can you make it after things have settled down a bit?"

"Of course." Ricott nodded firmly.

I gathered everyone together and exited the castle acting normal, without trying to sneak around. We were in plain sight, but I was hoping the city residents wouldn't bother us.

I looked up at the sky after we left the castle. It was a clear blue, making it seem as if the fierce battles that we had just been tangled up in had been a dream.

The expeditionary force led by Nakahana was still heading back to Jupiter under this clear sky. Right—the battle hadn't ended yet. In fact, it was just getting started. But for today, I wanted to take a break.

Third Bath — Steam, the Final Battle, and...

After we left the castle, we headed to the light temple, but we were met with one problem when we arrived.

“NOOOOOO!!!”

A high-pitched shriek...nope, a gruff voice echoed in the air. Phoenix was trying to resist entering the light temple.

“U-Um, what’s that...?” the young temple knight guarding the gate asked nervously. It was no wonder why he was perturbed—he was looking at a skeleton, after all.

I answered that he was a demon, but he didn’t mean any harm. It wasn’t a lie—Phoenix was a former demon general, but he was also a cleric of darkness. A pretty high-ranking one, at that. His devotion toward Rakti was just as high, and he wouldn’t dare to do anything that might upset her. I assumed he just didn’t want to enter the light temple because he was a cleric of darkness.

“Rakti, you go first,” I suggested.

“Huh? Oh, sure.”

“My goddeeeesssss!”

Rakti stepped inside the light temple, then Phoenix did a one-eighty and followed behind her. The temple knights couldn’t react in time to his sudden movement.

I didn’t blame them, though. Even though Phoenix had been known as the general who had fought and lost one hundred battles, that was only when it came to leading his own army. It was hard to believe, but his strength as an individual rivaled that of the five Great Demon Generals. In fact, back in the castle, he had charged through the courtyard and made a show of himself brawling against over a dozen knights all alone. It sounded like the knights had defeated him once, but he revived immediately afterward and got his revenge on them. I guess it paid to be immortal.

“I suppose he was the same way back when he was a demon general...” Clena mumbled, looking astounded. Haruno and some others nodded as well.

I see, so he tends to charge into battles by himself and barely does anything to command his own army. Maybe that’s the reason why he lost all one hundred of those battles.

In any case, keeping the Torano’o warriors lingering outside the

temple was going to make passersby nervous, so the rest of us hurried to enter the temple as well.

We had a large group with us, so I quickly greeted the temple elder and asked for permission to open the door to the Unlimited Bath in their courtyard. I hadn't had time to buy any fruit to give as an offering today, so I instead gifted them a soap set generated by the Unlimited Bath. The temple elder had seen this before, so he didn't question it.

I should invite him to dinner today too. I want to show him how much the Bath has grown. I want to use the opportunity to ask him about building the temples for the six goddess sisters too.

We received permission to use the courtyard. *Well, the elder can see the courtyard teeming with Torano'o warriors from his own window, so I think he had no other choice.*

I opened the door to the Unlimited Bath in the courtyard and let everyone inside to rest.

"Will you be okay, Touya?" Haruno asked. "You used a lot of MP back in the throne room..."

"Don't worry, I'll be fine." We had sprayed foam all over the place in the throne room, but I personally hadn't done much other than that. It had been nothing for me. "But are you okay, Haruno?"

"To be honest, I'm pretty tired..."

That was to be expected after she'd used her Unlimited Reflection so many times. *In that case, she should rest up for the remainder of today.* I told everyone else that they didn't need to hold back either.

"We shall use the pool," Rulitora said as he took Dokutora and the other warriors to bathe in the pool.

"Let's take a bath too, Touya," Clena suggested, and the rest of us headed to the large bath in the annex building.

"The pool and the baths all use Sir Touya's MP, huh..." Roni commented as if she just remembered that fact.

"Yeah, but it's not a burden for me, so don't worry about it and rest up." Considering the number of people I had hosted when we were traveling across the sea, the amount of MP I had used in the throne room was nothing in comparison.

Sandra, Rin, and Lumis stayed behind in case we had any visitors. Brahms and Mem also stayed behind since they usually bathed with just each other.

The people at the temple know about sand lizardmen since they've seen Rulitora before, but it's probably the first time many of them have seen a dark elf, so it'll be helpful for Sandra and the other temple knights to stay with them.

"Um, I'll stay as well..." Sera volunteered.

"No, you should rest, Sera." Sandra stopped her.

Sera had been healing the injured all over the castle. She might not have admitted it, but I was betting she was exhausted as well. Even Rin, who would normally protest that she wanted a break right now, was pushing Sera on, so she must also have been able to tell how tired Sera was. *We should make sure she rests up—*

“Okay, let’s go! ♪” Prae picked Sera up and went off running.

“Huh?! Wait, I’m a bit too old to be carried like this...!” Sera’s voice faded into the distance.

She seemed embarrassed, and it was no wonder why. Prae had been holding her to her chest like a baby. *I wouldn’t want to be seen like that in front of other people either.*

I began to follow after them, but then I felt a tug at my sleeve. I looked back to see Yukina staring at me with sparkling eyes. After watching Prae and Sera, she must have remembered the times from back when she was alive. I got the hint and scooped her up into a princess carry.

“Touyaaaa! ♥” Yukina drew her arms around my neck and brought her cheeks to mine, then smiled gleefully. Daisy had been sitting on my shoulder, but she moved to the top of my head so that she wouldn’t get tangled up.

Rium and Rakti were looking at us with envy. Haruno was shooting us glances as well from behind them. Needless to say, I couldn’t pick all of them up, so they would have to wait another day.

We brought clothes to change into and entered the changing room in front of the large bath. Prae and Sera had already gone in ahead of us. What looked like Prae’s clothing had been scattered all over the floor of the changing room. *Hm? What’s that large white cloth...?* I was about to turn away, but Yukina came up and covered my eyes with her hands.

“Oh come on, Prae!” she exclaimed.

“I’ll clean it up!” It sounded like Rakti was picking up Prae’s clothing.

“Those two ran straight here, so do they even have a change of clothes?” I asked with my eyes still covered.

“Come to think of it, I don’t think so,” Clena replied.

“I’ll go bring some for them!” Roni offered.

I heard Clena and Roni respond back to me, followed by a single pair of footsteps exiting the changing room. I had brought up the right thing to ask. It wasn’t my place to bring spare clothing for them, so I left it to Roni.

I brought Yukina’s hands away from my face and asked Daisy to get down from my head. As I undressed, I noticed that Haruno, Rakti, and Rium had started a game of rock paper scissors behind me with an intense look in their eyes. Clena was looking at them as if she

wanted to say something. She looked bewildered—no, she looked more like she'd also wanted to join in but was too embarrassed to. *I can talk to her about it later.*

Anyway, I could guess what they were betting on. I quickly finished changing into a yuamigi.

"I won." Rium had come out as victorious. She was walking toward me triumphantly while holding out her hand in a scissors shape.

"I'm not going to bring you in while you're still wearing those clothes."

She noticed that she was still dressed after I'd pointed it out, so she started silently undressing next to me.

"Hn!" Then, she brought both arms over her head while bare naked and prompted me to carry her.

"Put on your yuamigi too."

"Yeah, you put this on." Yukina had finished changing and brought an extra yuamigi for Rium.

"Preparations complete." Rium had impatiently finished changing. I finally picked her up, and she looked a little proud of herself. I also brought Yukina and Daisy with me into the bath.

I was carrying Rium in a baby hold like Prae had. Yukina and Rakti might have resisted such a thing by saying it was too childish, but Rium seemed to like these kinds of things. While we're on the topic, both Clena and Haruno would gladly be held like this when no one else was looking, but that was our secret.

After entering the bath, I saw Sera lying on top of Prae in the cedarwood tub. *Taking a bath with Prae like that does wonders for you, in multiple ways.*

Prae noticed us and gave us a wave. Sera also waved at us, but pretty languidly. It looked like she had given in to her exhaustion.

Prae seemed much calmer now compared to earlier. I trusted her to keep looking after Sera.

Next, Haruno and Rakti came into the bath.

"Touya, let's wash each other's hair today too! ♥" Haruno said. Her hair had gotten a bit dusty after her feats in the throne room. *I should wash her hair first today.*

Clena and Roni entered the bath last, but they were keeping a distance away from us.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Um, well... I want to wash my own hair today!" Clena said, and the two of them went to the other end of the bath.

Hm, maybe they're worried about how they smell since they were in the aqueduct the whole time? It had been a pretty clean place, so I didn't think they had any reason to worry, but maybe they thought

differently.

The ones who remained were Rium, whom I was holding, Daisy on top of my head, Yukina, Haruno, and Rakti. The six of us went to the showers.

I carefully washed each girl's hair one by one. This had been an almost daily occurrence for us, so I had gotten used to it by now. After I was done, the girls would wash my hair. Today, it was Yukina and Rakti's turn.

Next, we walked to the bathtub. I grabbed a basin for Daisy to use, then Yukina pulled me along as we entered the bath. I sat down next to Daisy's basin, then Yukina sat across from me. Haruno sat next to me, and Rakti sat next to Yukina.

"I'll be here..." Rium decided to use me as a seat. She stood with her back to me so that her small butt was right before my eyes. Her wet yuamigi was stuck to her skin and clearly outlined her figure. She lowered her butt to my chest, then slid down to sit on top of me.

"Hey, Rium...!"

Her yuamigi slid up as she did that. *Judging by the feeling of her bare skin against me, she's probably fully exposed under the water right now.* I hastily picked her up a little and pulled her yuamigi back down. Rium didn't seem to care one bit as she took my arms and brought them around her waist. This had always been the case, but she really was clingy.

After a while of relaxation, Rakti started to timidly draw closer to me...but she stopped right before me and didn't say a word. She had been doing this a lot recently. Apparently, she didn't think that being needy was very big-sister-like. She had been trying to behave like my older sister ever since I'd started seeing the Goddess of Chaos in my dreams, and this was one of the side effects. *I'd be happy if she went back to being indulgent...but how should I react now?*

"Rakti, come here." *I guess I'll be the one asking for attention.*

"Hmph..."

I picked Rium up and shifted her to my right thigh, then beckoned Rakti toward my free spot on the left. Rakti puffed out her cheeks a bit in frustration, but she came to me anyway. She probably thought that she should grant me what I'd asked of her. I guess she thought that it *was* big-sister-like to be nice to her little brother.

It was hard to balance the two girls together, so I wrapped an arm around each one's waist to support them. Both of them leaned against me in response, though Rakti looked a little embarrassed as she did so.

Yukina also came closer and sat beside me. I was now sitting between her and Haruno. Haruno and Clena, the oldest girls in our party, were usually the ones to sit on either side of me when we bathed together. Yukina had been trying to do the same recently.

Apparently, she thought that they were mature adults and had been trying to imitate them. Basically, instead of trying to take a spot in my lap like Rium and Rakti, she was trying to act like the mature one and watch over them from the side.

"Hmph..." Though judging by how she had wrapped her tail around my waist below the water, she hadn't been able to keep her immature side in. She had also started to lean into me.

In the meantime, Haruno gave us a smile as she observed us. She seemed composed right now, but this was just how she acted in front of others. When we were alone, she'd cling on to me even more than Rium did, but that was a secret.

After some time had passed, Sera left the bath. Prae said that she would soak a while longer, so Yukina, Rium, and Daisy went over to her. I looked over to Clena and Roni, who had finally finished washing themselves and were ready to soak in the tub now.

I took Haruno and Rakti, then beckoned to Clena and Roni, and the five of us went to the indoor open-air bath on the second floor. I wanted to check on the expeditionary force while we had the chance.

I projected a picture on the dome-shaped ceiling immediately after we came up. I wanted to get this over with before we started soaking. We had been checking on the expeditionary force every night, so I had a general idea of where they should be. I displayed a bird's-eye view of a wide area, and Roni was able to locate them in the middle of their journey soon afterward.

"They're about where we predicted they would be. It doesn't look like they're in a hurry," Clena remarked as she inspected the terrain around them.

At this rate, it would take them about another week to arrive. Next, we checked on the Torano'o tribe in Hades and Shakova's group headed to Hephaestus and confirmed that everyone seemed to be fine.

"Okay, that's all. Everyone looks okay." Now it was time for us to look at some nice scenery as we soaked in the bath. "What should the view for today be?" I asked.

"It's too early for stars in the sky... I wonder if there's a nice view around the mountain where we left the underground tunnel," Clena suggested.

Normally, I would project the starry sky at night, but the sun was still out right now. *I should find a nice background for us as we bathe.*

We relaxed in the bath while the screen displayed a view of a forest. Haruno was sitting across from me now, maybe to give Clena and Roni some time to sit with me. Rakti was sitting next to Haruno, and Roni was sitting next to me.

"I'll be here, then."

"Hey, that's not fair, Clena!" Haruno protested.

Clena sat down on top of me in the same way that Rakti had just been sitting earlier.

“It’s fine, right?” Clena looked up at me and asked mischievously. I didn’t refuse her, of course. Haruno and Roni were now looking at us enviously, but this time, I didn’t have room for two.

“I don’t smell, right?” she asked.

“Don’t worry, you smell fine,” I reassured her. Clena breathed a sigh of relief at my answer and leaned backward. “Thanks for your work today.”

“It was nothing compared to everything you did,” Clena insisted.

“Maybe, but you had your own mission to be in charge of, so let me thank you.”

“...Then pet me.”

“On your head?”

“Of course. Where were you thinking?” As she said that, she turned herself around to face me and hugged me again. I supported her body weight and petted her head as requested. Clena snuggled up against me happily in response. I could feel something soft pressing against me.

Just as Rakti and Yukina had been changing recently, Clena had changed as well. I could tell why. She knew now that she was the granddaughter of the demon lord and also that he had given me the Hoshi-kiri, a symbol of his successor. That was a sign that the demon lord approved of our relationship.

Ever since then, Clena had become more aware of her surroundings, but she had also become more aggressively intimate whenever she’d had the chance. I imagined a lot was on her mind. It was the same for me. We were probably both holding off until our current problems were resolved, though.



Clena removed my hand from her head, seemingly satisfied after being petted for a while. She then stared up at me with passionate eyes. At the same time, I felt a piercing stare from Haruno on us. She was hinting heavily that it was her turn next. Clena also noticed and sighed softly, then kissed me on the cheek and pulled away from me.

Haruno enthusiastically came up to me next. However, she stopped right before me. I guessed she was hinting that I should make the last move. I held out my arms, and she eagerly jumped into them. I supported her body weight and hugged her tightly while also enjoying the soft lumps she was pressing against me. Maybe it was because Clena had spurred her on a bit, but Haruno had also become more bold recently.

“You did great today too, Haruno. Thank you.”

“Yes, you’re very welcome! ♪”

We wouldn’t have been able to pull off the victory in the throne room if it hadn’t been for Haruno. I should pamper her as much as she wants today to show my thanks.

She was being even more assertive than Clena now. She pecked my cheeks, forehead, and lips with kisses, and I took it all in.

Finally satisfied, Haruno peeled herself off me. Roni had her eyes cast down next to me, looking embarrassed. She kept shooting curious glances in my direction though. When our eyes met, her face turned red and she looked away. However, she looked at me again right afterward, and our eyes met again. She looked like she was expecting something.

I know, I know. Roni had worked hard today too. I opened my arms wide in Roni’s direction, and she timidly scooped closer to me. I pulled her a little strongly into a hug, but she didn’t resist and let herself be wrapped in my arms. She finally looked up at me with sparkling eyes as if to say, “Praise me!”

I didn’t let her down. I brought her head close to me and ruffled her hair, then massaged the base of her large ears. She squirmed a little as if she was feeling good, but also out of embarrassment. That made the soft mounds of flesh between us jiggle a bit too.

“Kuuuh... ♥” She closed her eyes and let out a tender sigh. She was a wolf demi-human, but her voice was as cute as a cat’s. She never let herself behave like this when she was diligently serving Clena, but apparently, she had decided that it was okay to be pampered by me. She seemed to enjoy these massages too.

Roni brought her legs up a bit and wrapped her arms around me. I extended my arms past her yuamigi and slowly massaged her legs from her ankles to her thighs. It was hard to tell where I was touching from beneath the water, so once in a while my fingers went a little too

close to where they shouldn't touch. Each time, she hugged me a little tighter, and our skin stuck together even more. But then, she suddenly pulled away from me and began to lift the ends of her yuamigi.

"Sir Touya..."

"No." I stopped her hands from going farther. *Don't look at me with such sad eyes.*

She was trying to ask me to rub her belly next, but if she'd lifted up her yuamigi right then, it would have turned into a risqué—or, well, a *risky* situation. I couldn't resist that look in her eyes as she whimpered at me, though. I rubbed her belly from above the yuamigi, and her face flushed red as she let out sweet sighs.

After I rubbed her for a while, she started hugging me again. I couldn't keep rubbing her belly like that, so I reached for her legs again, but she brought a leg up to me instead. I tried to balance us so that we wouldn't fall, which just made her lean into me further. *I guess she really does want me to massage her bare skin without the yuamigi in between.*

"It's a no for both of you too." Haruno and Rakti had begun to lift up their yuamigi as well, but I stopped them. *I won't change my mind even if you give me that look of jealousy.*

I continued massaging everyone until they were satisfied. Roni and Rakti had traded places, and now I was sitting back while hugging Rakti.

"You really are amazing, Touya," Haruno said out of the blue.

"How so?"

"Your MP, I mean. You don't seem tired at all even after using all this MP..."

Oh, that's what she meant. I was fine, but Haruno had gotten pretty worn out today.

The difference was probably how frequently we used MP. Unlike my Unlimited Bath, Haruno's Unlimited Reflection wasn't meant for daily use. Our stats would grow the more we used them, but the inverse was true as well.

I was also the only one being taught directly by the goddesses, and she had probably never thought to use her gift on a daily basis to make it evolve.

"Should I try training too?" Haruno asked.

"Training? Like studying magic?"

"That's one way. That'll probably take a lot of time, though..."

She would probably learn faster than I could, at least.

"I think the best way is to just keep using your gift," Rakti said from atop my lap.

"I was thinking that too, but...wouldn't I make this place

disappear?"

"Ah..."

Haruno was talking about this dimension known as the Unlimited Bath. Before our travels, she had used her gift inside this bath once when it was still small. Nothing had happened back then, but her gift had evolved significantly after she'd inherited the powers of the Goddess of Wind. She didn't know what might happen if she used her gift here, and she didn't want to risk it.

"Huh? It wouldn't disappear." Rakti dismissed her concerns.

Haruno looked at us, or more specifically, at Rakti on my lap, a bit puzzled. "This place is now considered a sanctuary, so a gift won't make it disappear!"

That's the first time I'm hearing that. I hadn't even considered the possibility.

"What's a sanctuary?" Haruno asked. I was wondering the same thing at this point.

"Like the place in my dreams...though you've never been there before, Haruno. Oh! The route that sister Wind used to transport you to the water capital was a sanctuary!" Rakti explained with a confident look on her face. I guess she was saying that it was basically a goddess's powers.

"So my Unlimited Bath falls under that category now?"

"Yes! That's why you're my little brother now!"

In short, the space and furnishings inside the Unlimited Bath were considered a sanctuary now. It was easiest to think of it as being one tier above a gift. I asked Rakti when the Bath had become that way, and she said that it had actually begun evolving into a sanctuary ever since rooms other than the bath itself had started taking shape inside. I'd been granted the Goddess of Chaos's blessing when I'd first been summoned to this world, so maybe that had something to do with it as well.

"So, even if I used my gift here, the Unlimited Bath wouldn't disappear?"

"The space itself won't disappear, but things formed by the Unlimited Bath will," Rakti explained.

"So, the bathtub itself would stay, but the water might disappear..." Haruno pondered deeply. "So I could use a stream of water to do something like meditate under a waterfall?"

Her next words came from left field. She looked at me seriously, but I didn't know how to react. I mean, she was on the right track thinking that continuously erasing water with Unlimited Reflection would count as training. Maybe meditating under a waterfall was one of her dreams? She did have a silly side to her.

"Let's try it now!" Haruno stood right up with a splash. She

seemed excited, so I decided not to point out that sitting in the bath while erasing the water around her would accomplish the same thing.

“Aren’t you tired...?” I asked.

“You’ve got to strike while the iron’s hot!”

In other words, carpe diem.

I doubted I could stop her while her eyes were sparkling like that, so I followed along. The wall behind the cedarwood tub on the first floor had a stream of water that we could use.

“Do you want to come with us?” I asked Clena and Roni.

“We’ll stay here a bit longer,” Clena answered.

“I’ll come with you!” Rakti said, and she came along with us down to the first floor.

Prae and the others had left the bath already, so it was just us three now. Haruno stepped inside the cedarwood tub and waded to the far wall until she reached the stream of water. I could tell how excited she was from where I was standing.

“Be careful, Haruno,” I cautioned her.

“Yes, you should just try it for a bit and see what happens...” Rakti added on.

There shouldn’t have been any issue since she was just going to make some water disappear, but we stood watch just in case. Rakti and I were prepared to run to her if we needed to.

“Time to begin!” Haruno announced while standing underneath the stream of water. She looked at us as water splashed down from above her head, then she closed her eyes and put her hands together as if she were chanting a spell.

“Now! Unlimited Reflection!” She activated her gift as Rakti and I looked on. Light radiated from her body, and the water that had been streaming down on her vanished. The stream of water had been cut off from a little above her head. It was still flowing, but it was vanishing into nothingness.

“Oh!” The water around her feet had disappeared too. She was still standing inside the tub, but water had stopped flowing in the area just around her. It was a surreal sight.

“...Oh?!” And...Haruno’s yuamigi had also vanished. She was now stark naked, her goddess-like figure on full display.

“Look, Touya! The water’s gone, right?!” Haruno exclaimed in delight, her eyes still shut.

You’re telling me to look, but that’s a tall order right now. I had stared at her for a few seconds out of surprise, but I’d looked away as soon as I had come back to my senses. *That’s right, the yuamigi is also something generated by the Unlimited Bath.*



Before long, Haruno realized the state she was in and hastily deactivated her Unlimited Reflection, then crouched down while covering her body with her hands. The stream of water and the water inside the tub came back, but the yuamigi didn't. Technically, the water hadn't come back and was just being generated again, but the same didn't go for the yuamigi.

"D-Did you see...?"

"Just a little." It was just a few seconds. Though those few seconds were now burned into my memory. "W-Wait a bit, I'll bring a change of clothes!"

"Oh, I'll go!" Rakti ran off before I could. Actually, I wanted to be the one to go in this situation. I didn't know what to do with a naked Haruno next to me.

"..."

"..."

The silence was awkward. Rakti returned pretty quickly, but the time we had spent waiting felt like an eternity.

After that, Haruno said that she would order a yuamigi at Ficus Brand to use for her training. I wanted to ask why she wouldn't wear normal clothing and just try to erase the water around her feet, but I kept it to myself. I'm sure she wanted to make her waterfall meditation dreams come true.

On that note, Roni had been the first one to back up Haruno's idea. She had also wanted a two-piece yuamigi so that I could rub her belly directly. I wanted to mention that I was happy to rub her belly any time outside of the bath, but I kept that to myself as well. *That* was because I'd wanted to rub her belly too.

With that out of the way, we finished our baths. Rulitora and the other Torano'o warriors had already returned from the pool as well. Brahms and Mem said that they could take a bath later, so they traded lookout duty with Sandra's group, who went to take their baths.

Roni said that she would prepare a light meal and headed to the Goddess of Fire's kitchen, and Haruno and Rakti followed. *Is Haruno still thinking about what happened earlier? She doesn't have to worry about it...* Well, it wasn't my place to say that to her, so I kept quiet and watched her go.

I left Rulitora and the other Torano'o warriors on lookout duty, then the rest of us went to the second floor to relax. Clena and I climbed the stairs to find Prae sitting cross-legged with Sera. Yukina, Rium, and Daisy were around them as well.

Prae was holding Sera in her arms like she was cradling a baby. I recognized that as a super comfortable sleeping spot, like you were in a hammock, but it was embarrassing when you had onlookers. Case in

point, Sera's face was bright red, so I lent her a hand.

"Yukina, Rium, who wants to go first?"

"Hn!" Rium raised her hand, so I pointed to her. She tottered toward Prae and demanded a hug, which made Prae stammer a bit in hesitation. It seemed like she didn't want to let Sera go yet.

"I-I'm fine now. Thank you very much." Sera took the opportunity to say a word of thanks and climbed down. She had turned red all the way to her ears. The embrace itself had been embarrassing, but then we had come up and witnessed her like that too. *Don't worry. We won't talk about it.*

In the meantime, Prae had picked Rium up and was cradling her now. Rium was perfectly content to be treated like that.

"Thank you, Prae. Sera's feeling a lot better now," I said.

"Is she? I'm happy to hear! ♪" Prae grinned at us widely. I reached my hand out to pat her on the head, and she lowered her head toward me in turn. I gave her all the head pats I could muster.

Then I noticed that since Prae had bent forward for me to reach her, Rium was now buried under her boobs. She was slapping her hands against them, probably struggling to breathe, but Prae had yet to notice.

"Ahn!"

Right when I thought I should lend Rium a hand, she seemingly hit a sensitive spot and made Prae's body bounce back up. Rium climbed down from Prae's arms and hid herself behind Clena.

The slap had been either painful or surprising, since Prae was now looking at us with tears in her eyes. I told her that everything would be okay and patted her again. On her head, I mean.

Prae wanted to snuggle up against me now, so I sat down and let her have her fill. It was admittedly a bit difficult to support her body weight, but I was all for it. In the meantime, Daisy had perched herself on top of my head. She had probably realized that I wouldn't be moving for a while.

You can really tell how big Prae is when she lies down like this.

Yukina and Rium approached us again and also lay down using Prae's waist as a pillow. The girls would often snuggle up against Prae like this, and Prae would happily pamper them in turn—though that's not to say Prae herself didn't like to be pampered too. I patted her head in my lap, and she gave me a happy, mellow smile.

Clena and Sera didn't join the younger ones and instead sat down on either side of me. Sera also started patting Prae's head.

"I think I prefer being the one fawning over others," Sera said.

"If I had to pick, I suppose I'm the same way," Clena agreed. I decided not to mention that she always asked to be pampered when no one else was watching.

Sera really was that type, though. I recalled that she had been looking after children during my stay at the light temple. I had let them take a shower here too. *If we have time, maybe we can let the kids play in the pool.*

After a while of idle chatter, I started to smell something nice. Roni and the others had come upstairs with the meal that they'd prepared, which made Prae sit right up. Yukina and Rium, who had been lying on her, rolled onto the floor.

Now that Haruno was here too, we reminisced more about the time we had spent here before. Haruno still seemed embarrassed, so I kept talking with her to slowly break down any barriers that may have risen between us; I figured things would only drag out longer if we avoided each other. Haruno seemed to get my message and responded to me proactively, though her cheeks were still a bit red.

We finished eating and relaxed in the room for a while longer, but then worries suddenly returned to my mind. *We still need to deal with the expeditionary force. We can't just lie around like this forever.*

"How long do you think the sacred family's meeting will take?" I asked.

"I doubt it'll finish today," Clena answered. "First, they need to gather information on their current situation, then they need time to discuss everything and decide on a plan. I guess it'll depend on how much time they take to gather information."

"We did get here ahead of the expeditionary force, but we don't have *that* much time..."

"The sacred king is still recovering, so I don't think they have the resources to launch a very deep investigation," Haruno chimed in.

"I think Haruno is right," Clena continued. "Taking that into account, they might use today and tomorrow to gather information, decide on the prince's punishment the day after, and lastly, leave Princess Franchellis in charge of dealing with the expeditionary force."

"The prince's punishment, huh...? I wonder what they'll do with him," I pondered.

"That's for the sacred family to think about. The expeditionary force is a separate issue," Clena pointed out.

"Also, I don't think we'll have to worry about the prince anymore when it comes to building the six temples. He won't have a say in the matter," Haruno explained.

Clena and Haruno brought up some good points. I couldn't guess what they'd do with the prince, but this incident definitely would have weakened his standing. In contrast, Princess Franchellis would have a stronger standing now. We weren't in a position to voice any opinions beyond that—or rather, it would have been silly to try to get

involved.

“So, should we plan for them to contact us again the day after tomorrow?” I asked.

“That should be the day she’s appointed to deal with the expeditionary force, so they might not contact us again until the day after that,” Clena replied.

“Nah, the princess would start laying the groundwork as soon as she can,” I reasoned.

“That’s true...”

I wouldn’t expect any less of the princess.

Based on our expectations, we should use today to start replenishing our food supplies. It’ll take time to prepare all the food that we need to order.

“Considering how much we’ll order, we should split it between multiple shops. Maybe we should ask the people at the temple to help,” Haruno suggested.

“I’ll ask for someone to come by,” Sandra offered.

“Thank you, Sandra,” I replied.

Since we’re here, we should ask someone more familiar with the area.

I said my thanks to Sandra as she went off. We should decide on what to order before she comes back.

“What do you think we should order, Roni?” asked Clena.

“Hmm, I’d like to stock up on meat again,” Roni answered.

We can catch fish in the Goddess of Water’s fishing pond, but we can only get meat by going out to hunt.

“I’d like some fresh vegetables too,” Roni continued. “We’ve been eating pickled vegetables for so long.”

“Yeah, I’d like some fruit too. I want to eat my fill while we’re here,” I added.

Though we had the Goddess of Wind’s refrigerator, we couldn’t preserve everything during our long travels. The first things that would spoil were fresh fruits and vegetables.

We continued chatting about what we wanted to cook and eat while jotting down our shopping list on a piece of paper until Sandra came back with a cleric. For some reason, the two of them were carrying a holy tool that I had seen before.

“That’s for updating status cards, isn’t it?” I asked. I remembered using the tool to make my status card, and also from the few times I had updated it.

“Yes, they suggested that you update your cards since you’re all back,” Sandra affirmed.

They’d carried the holy tool all the way here since I couldn’t move away from the Unlimited Bath. I hadn’t been able to update my card in Ares since they hadn’t had a light temple, so this was a good chance

to do so. I went to my room to get my card.

I touched my hand to the holy tool and closed my eyes. In the next moment, the sound of a huge explosion erupted in my eardrums.

I opened my eyes in surprise to see smoke coming out of the device, so I quickly brought my hand away from it. I looked around to see that everyone had crouched down with their hands to their ears. I then looked at the cleric across from me, who had frozen still. She didn't seem to understand what had just transpired.

"Wh-What just happened...?" I asked.

"The holy tool lit up, and then there was an extremely loud noise..." the cleric replied.

That had been the noise that had pierced my eardrums just now. I looked at the tool again and saw that the part my hand had been in contact with was red. Had it started burning there? I wondered what would have happened if I hadn't brought my hand away...

I helped everyone back up. Fortunately, nothing had happened besides the light and loud noise, so there wasn't any damage other than to our eyes and eardrums.

We stepped away from the tool in case something might happen again, but then Rium walked up to it, took a knife from her pocket, and skillfully took off the cover. Rium and I peeked inside to find that the tool's inner workings had been burned black and were still smoking.

"Did it explode from the inside?!" I exclaimed.

"I think so," Rium answered.

So, if the cover hadn't kept itself in place, the explosion would have extended to our surroundings too. Thank god it was a sturdy cover.

"How did this happen, though? Was it broken?" I asked.

"I think...it's because you have too much MP, Touya," Rakti suggested.

"It was my fault?!" I raised my voice in surprise at Rakti's statement. I already knew that my MP had grown enough that the status card couldn't measure it, but I hadn't been expecting this to happen...

"A-Amazing! So this is the power of a Hero of the Goddess! This will become a legend passed down through the ages!" The cleric had come back to her senses and was now yelling in excitement.

I'd rather not have this become a legend, though. Everyone here could have gotten injured. I waited for Sera to calm the cleric down.

"Wow! That was incredible, Sir Touya! A miracle!"

No, it was just an accident. Even Sera, though? She was squealing and jumping around in joy, not even a hint of her usual calm demeanor left. *You're being a little cute right now, Sera. I wish I could*

record a video of this and show it to you later after you calm down.

I wondered if all the others from the temple were reacting similarly, and sure enough, Sandra and Rin were getting riled up. Lumis was staring at me with sparkles in her eyes.

I was at least relieved that none of them were demanding that I repay the damages. Though even having that worry was a sign that I was simply bewildered too.

We immediately reported the incident to the temple elder. He didn't get angry at all; rather, he seemed elated and said that this would become a symbol of prestige. He claimed that this was both a miracle and a memento of the hero. Maybe it was like the carriage I had left with the light temple in Neptune, and it would turn into a tourist attraction later...

On that note, Sera mentioned that this might help us gain traction regarding the topic of the six goddess temples. "If you perform a miracle, you'll gain honor as a Hero of the Goddess, and that increases your authority as well."

"Even if two people are saying the same thing, the temple will listen to the person they respect more," Haruno summarized bluntly.

That's a straightforward way of putting it.

I hadn't wrecked the holy tool on purpose, but the people in the temple seemed happy, and we'd apparently gained something out of it too. *I guess all's well that ends well.*

The only problem was that the temple had only had one of the tools that could measure stats, so no one else could update their status cards anymore either, but there was no helping it at this point.

I relayed the results of our meeting to everyone else, and Clena suggested that we invite the clergy over for dinner. Dinner today would be hosted in the Unlimited Bath.

The clergymen reacted with shock and awe at how big the Unlimited Bath was.

"This should increase your prestige as well," Clena said with a giggle.

So, one of the purposes of this dinner is to show off how much my gift has grown. Judging by the clergymen's reactions, the move had been pretty effective.

We served a miso-focused menu, the same as the one we'd served when we'd hosted the demon lord. Haruno had worked hard to prepare several Japanese-style dishes. Thanks to her, the temple elder and clerics loved the food. Their favorite was the miso-stewed fish. Jupiter was a landlocked country, so ocean fish was a rare delicacy for them.

After dinner, I discussed my idea to build temples for the six

goddess sisters in the remnants of Hades, and the temple elder was surprisingly on board.

"If you, Sir Touya, wish to accomplish it, then I see no reason to refuse."

I see. This is the authority of the Hero of the Goddess that Sera had mentioned. I was expecting the light temple to be the biggest obstacle in this plan, but things were going pretty smoothly. However, the temple elder brought up one problem: the delegation of the temple elder for each temple. The temple elder said that many people would want to step up as candidates.

True, I hadn't even considered that. I had at least thought that the only candidate for the temple of darkness would be Phoenix.

Come to think of it, the only water clerics I know of are the gillmen, who are dolphin demi-humans, so I doubt they'll come all the way to Hades. Also, the only wind cleric I know is Prae. I guess Haruno, who's inherited the Goddess of Wind's powers, could be a candidate too. I glanced in her direction, but she seemingly could tell what I was thinking, since she shook her head to say no. *I guess there's no helping that, since she hasn't been studying clerical magic like me.*

In that case, the only candidate left is Prae. I looked in her direction, which she noticed, and she grinned back at me. *She's cute, but I don't think I can appoint her as a temple elder. She really is cute though.*

That leaves the light, fire, and earth temple elders...

"That's not up for me to decide though, is it?" I asked. That went for the water temple too. Having limited candidates from the start was one thing, but I'd prefer that the temples with a large clergy narrow down their candidates by themselves. Since I was leading this project, I would at least need to interview them, but Haruno and I could do that together when the time came.

"Do you have any suggestions?" the temple elder asked.

"My network isn't that wide..." And I couldn't exactly ask the elder in front of me to leave his temple and come with me. I wanted to suggest Sera, but she had been looking at me pointedly since earlier. She was implying that the responsibility would be too much for her. *I guess Sera is out of the running too.* "I'd like to request just one thing..."

"Yes?"

"I'd like assurance that things won't turn out like they did in the past."

I didn't go into more detail, but the temple elder picked up on what I had meant and went into deep thought. Three hundred years ago, followers of the Goddess of Light had tried to eradicate the followers of all the other goddesses. The light temple hadn't been behind the more recent attack against the wind temple, but some light clerics had been involved. I assumed that those clerics had been under

the effects of Unlimited Love. There was also the pastor who had conducted criminal activity in the raver market in Athena. I wouldn't want a person like that as a candidate.

I assumed the temple elder realized all of this already, though. He wasn't to blame for any of those wrongdoings, so I brought up the subject once and left it at that. Also, there was a light temple in every country except Ares. Though the head temple was here in Jupiter, this wasn't something that they could act independently on. I had to leave it to them to talk it out first.

In any case, we wouldn't come to any conclusions just by talking here, so we decided to readdress it another day.

After that, we guided the clergy to the large bath in the annex building. We split the group between men and women, and Sandra guided the women. The temple elder was especially surprised to see how large the bath had grown, since he'd known what it had looked like from before my travels. They of course didn't stay the night, but they made good use of the massage chairs.

The next day, Princess Franchellis paid us a covert visit with just a few guards. We had expected her to start laying the groundwork, but we weren't expecting the princess herself to show up. Since she was undercover, she understandably hadn't brought Cosmos, who might blow her cover immediately.

"I would rather not have a say in my brother's punishment, to be honest," said the princess with her brows furrowed. Whether she requested a light or a heavy sentence, she'd be suspected of doing it for personal gain either way, so she wanted to avoid contributing her opinion at all. That was understandable, since the prince's punishment would affect the princess's own future. She didn't seem to want to talk about it further.

I invited her to the reception room in the Bath's main building to discuss a different subject. I asked Roni to bring us some tea and for Haruno and Clena to join us.

"Have you decided how you'll deal with Nakahana's expeditionary force yet?" I asked.

"My father has yet to fully recover, so I have been appointed to lead our troops and battle against them..."

"Are you okay with that...?" I asked. The princess was wise, but that didn't mean that she had the skills to lead an army.

"Do not worry. Achilles will be the one actually commanding the troops."

The princess seemed to realize that concern herself, though. Princess Franchellis would be the commander in name only, while the former general Achilles would act as her support. She had traveled far

distances with Cosmos, but in no way was she a warrior or a soldier.

“Can’t you appoint Achilles as the commander in the first place? Or maybe give it to Kannami?” I asked in worry. “You shouldn’t put yourself in danger by going to the battlefield...”

The princess gave me a troubled smile and shook her head. “Ritsu has been named as the primary culprit for the current situation.”

“Huh? Well, yeah, ’cause she is.” *It was her gift that caused all of this.*

“In other words, the responsibility also falls on the sacred family, who summoned her,” the princess explained.

“I see.” Basically, the sacred family had to show that they were taking the initiative in resolving the problem that they had brought about. And the only person in the sacred family who could do that right now was Princess Franchellis.

“Um, will Kannami and Cosmos be joining that army?” Haruno asked.

“Yes, that is the plan.” The princess nodded.

“Are you asking us to participate as well?” Clena followed up, but the princess paused before responding.

I observed her for a bit, and then she softly cleared her throat, straightened her posture, and faced us again. “Ritsu plotted a coup d’état against the nation. While it is true that we hold responsibility as the ones who summoned her, we must also carry out punishment in accordance with the problems that she has caused.”

“Do you mean that the prince will be served a severe punishment too?” Haruno asked.

I see, maybe they want to name Ritsu as the primary culprit so that they can get by with only a light punishment for the prince. He only acted the way he had after being brainwashed by the gift, and he wouldn’t have lost his marbles otherwise. I can understand their ordeal... The judgment on the prince will be difficult.

“Though the brainwashing has been dispelled from my brother and his knights, Ritsu’s gift is still very much active. If we do not do something about it, history will repeat itself.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Clena nodded in agreement. Haruno and I had nothing to add either. Nakahana had gone too far. In a sense, she was acting like the demon lord had once upon a time.

“Even so, it would be inhumane to place the responsibility solely on her. I imagine Sir Cosmos would not be pleased either.” The princess looked at me and Haruno, which made the two of us look at each other.

I see. She expects the people from the same home country as Nakahana to feel the same way. I wasn’t that close with Nakahana, and I knew she was at fault, but I wouldn’t exactly be happy to see her

being punished either.

“So, I have a request for you.” The princess looked at us seriously.

“Let’s hear it.” I straightened my posture and faced the princess again.

“We shall face the expeditionary force head-on. Can you all act as a separate force and find an opportunity to strip Nakahana of her gift?”

Strip Nakahana of her gift, huh? The princess wasn’t asking us to defeat Nakahana directly, but rather to use the dimensional gate, a cleric spell of the Goddess of Chaos that only I could cast, to send her back to Japan. In doing so, Nakahana’s goddess blessing would disappear, and so would her gift. All the brainwashed troops she led would also be returned to normal. Afterward, the sacred family would judge that her punishment had been served by getting rid of her gift, and they wouldn’t pursue her further.

“Clena, Haruno...” I looked at the two of them, and they nodded at me. This sounded like a fine middle ground. “I understand. We’ll cooperate with your plan.” I held out my right hand...

“Thank you very much!” ...which the princess gripped back with both of her small hands.

Now then, the next question is how we should single out Nakahana while she’s being guarded by so many troops. We have to figure that out first.

“I don’t think we can capture Nakahana by ourselves. I’m sure they’ll be on guard,” I pointed out.

“Yes, it may not be impossible, but...”

Maybe we could predict where they’ll set up camp, get there in advance, then hide inside the Unlimited Bath. Then, when Nakahana comes close to the door, we’ll take her by surprise... Nah, that’s not realistic.

“I suppose the only way would be to find an opening while Jupiter’s army and Hephaestus’s army are battling them?” Haruno suggested. That did sound like the only way, but a lot of casualties would result. I wanted to devise a strategy that would minimize damages, especially on our side.

“I will ask Achilles for ideas as well...” The princess didn’t seem like she had any additional suggestions. That was understandable, since she was still an amateur when it came to military affairs. I mean, we were all amateurs here.

“Using game terminology, we could try a pincer movement...” I proposed.

“Using Jupiter’s army and Hephaestus’s army? That would reduce the damages on our end,” Clena said. She was probably thinking of board games when I said “game,” but I had meant PC games.

A common strategy in simulation games was to surround the enemy on multiple sides and put yourself at an advantage. I didn't know how it would work in real life, so that was something we needed to check with Achilles later. In this case, Jupiter's army would lie in wait for them from the front, and then Hephaestus's army would attack from behind.

"Would that be the ideal solution...?" The princess was hesitant. She didn't seem on board with the plan. "Is a strategy like that really possible?"

She seems skeptical, so we should discuss the details a little more.

"Well, the question is how we can pull off the pincer movement successfully," I explained.

"I was thinking... Maybe Jupiter's army could act as a decoy and keep the expeditionary force preoccupied, then when they aren't paying attention, Hephaestus's army could conduct a surprise attack?" Haruno suggested.

That would mean that Jupiter's army would have to fight against the expeditionary force alone until that surprise attack. The princess didn't point it out, but she seemed to have noticed that as well.

They could time their movements to synchronize their attacks... Well, that's easy to say. If this were a game, you could check every force's position in real time and sync their attacks, but in real life, that level of coordination would be difficult. The princess had every right to be skeptical right now. I had to think of some way to back up our argument.

"We could confirm the positions of each army with Touya's indoor open-air bath, right?" Clena suggested.

I had thought the same, but... "We can confirm their positions, but we have no way to relay that information to each troop," I replied.

"Can we use the holy tool that Touya and I had used to send messages before?" Haruno asked. "The two armies could use it to communicate with each other as they advance."

"But that's..."

Haruno's holy tool had broken, so we only had one on hand now. And those tools only worked with the one they'd been paired with, so we essentially had zero.

If we want to use holy tools to communicate with both Jupiter's army and Hephaestus's army, we need two sets, or four total. Nartha might have some extras, but it's unrealistic timewise for us to go to Athena, come back, and then deliver a holy tool to the Hephaestus army. That last step is by far the longest too. If the princess waits that long to dispatch her troops, the expeditionary force will make it back first. Using the holy tool to send messages and coordinate was a good idea, but...

"...Huh?" Then, I suddenly realized something. "Um, the reason

you're dispatching troops is because the sacred family is taking responsibility for the situation, right?"

"Hm? Yes, though that is not the only reason..." the princess replied.

"Can the light temple take responsibility too?" I asked.

"Excuse me?"

The sacred family wasn't the only one behind the summoning—the light temple had taken part too. My argument wasn't crazy. "More specifically, I'd like to ask if we can borrow the temple's holy tool for sending messages," I explained.

The messaging tablets we had used before were simplified versions of the temple's holy tool. The temple owned the "official" version. Their tool didn't have a limit on whom it could message either.

"The light temple in Hephaestus should have the same tool, so if the Hephaestus army borrows theirs, we wouldn't need to send them one ourselves."

"Wait a second, Touya," Clena interjected. "What would we do? Both us and Jupiter's army would need a tool, right? The temple only has one."

"We also have one in the castle, so there are enough." The princess explained that the castle also had a holy tool for sending messages in emergencies. It had been designed for the sacred family, and it could communicate with the holy tools at the various temples.

"Would it be possible to borrow that?" I asked.

"I believe so. I also agree that the temple should take responsibility," the princess said with a chuckle.

The prophecy of the demon lord's revival, which had caused us to be summoned, had been pieced together from message fragments that both the sacred family and the light temple had received. They wouldn't have arrived at that prophecy using only the fragments on one side, so that may have been something that the sacred family had been wanting to address.

The princess said that she'd take this idea back to Achilles to get his opinion. I was grateful for that. We were all amateurs here, so I wanted to hear what a former general had to say about our plan's feasibility.

"Oh yeah, I'll message the Hephaestus army about the holy tool in advance," I said.

"Can you get permission to use the holy tool in the temple as well?" the princess requested. "I shall figure something out with the one in the castle."

"Got it. Oh, and if you need help explaining the idea of using messages to coordinate, feel free to call for us or have Achilles come

here.”

“We have Sir Cos...*ahem*, Hero Natsuki with us, so I believe we will be fine, but I shall keep that in mind.”

You really have no faith in Cosmos, do you, princess?

If he had been the type to play simulation games, he might have actually understood the strategy, but explaining it to the people of this world was another story. I just had to hope that either Cosmos or Kannami could explain it properly.

The princess returned to the castle, and we went to speak with the temple elder. We went to Sera’s room first to ask her to come with us, but we also found Sandra, decked out in training gear, in the room with her. Apparently, Sandra had stopped by to invite Sera to train.

This was a good opportunity, so we also asked Sandra, a former pilgrim of the Goddess of Light, what she thought about our coordination strategy.

However, both of them tilted their heads at us. Sandra said that the pilgrims had never done anything like that between themselves in the past. They at least seemed to understand that if we could pull it off, we would minimize the casualties among our allies.

It turned out that Clena’s understanding of the strategy was about on the same level. Haruno and I looked at each other. *Maybe we should rethink how we explain this strategy.*

“The strategy aside, what do you think about borrowing the holy tool?” I asked.

“The temple’s holy tool, huh... It would be rather inconvenient to carry around. Though we’d be fine since we have the Unlimited Bath,” Sera answered.

We shouldn’t have any issues using it if we place it near the door. As for Jupiter’s army and Hephaestus’s army, they should be able to manage if they prepare a horse-drawn wagon. Our casualties would be reduced if we pulled this off, so I was hoping that they would cooperate.

“Do you think it’d be okay for us to borrow the tool in the first place?” I asked.

“For this temple, yes,” Sera replied. “But I don’t know what the temple in Hephaestus will say...”

Sera explained that while the temple in Jupiter held responsibility for the hero summoning, the temple in Hephaestus didn’t.

“But this is the head temple for the Goddess of Light, isn’t it?”

“It is, but the hero summoning hadn’t been discussed with all of the other temples beforehand...”

In that case, I would have to message them and persuade them myself if it came down to it. The light temple in Hephaestus didn’t hold much power, so maybe I could convince them by saying it was a chance for them to shine.

“Well, we need to send the message to Hephaestus as soon as we can. Can we meet with the elder right now?” I asked.

“We will explain the plan to him. You should prepare your message instead, Sir Touya,” Sera replied.

“Am I going too?” Sandra asked. “I need to change, so give me a moment.”

Sera’s right, we could at least get the message out of the way first. We left the talks with the temple elder to Sera and Sandra and prepared the message to send.

I couldn’t move from my spot thanks to the Unlimited Bath, so after we’d decided on what to write, Haruno would be the one to actually transmit the message.

“Okay, what should we tell them?” I asked. “We can explain the strategy and why we need to borrow the holy tool. If we can get them to understand the advantages of the coordination strategy, that should be enough to convince them.”

“We can send pictures too, right? Can you draw a diagram to help explain as well?” Clena added.

“That sounds like it’s worth a try.”

We decided on the contents of our message and sent it out, and it took half a day to reach the king of Hephaestus. He quickly understood the advantages of sharing information with each other to coordinate, but it took another seven transmissions to get him to understand all of the details beyond that.

After the third transmission, some clerics carried the holy tool to the Unlimited Bath, and I had them place it right past the door.

Hephaestus seemed to be analyzing each of our messages thoroughly, so it often took them about one hour to send us a response. Needless to say, we didn’t manage to finish within the day.

“Oh, you can keep the tool in there for now.” Sera had gotten us permission to borrow the holy tool while we were waiting on another message.

The device was much bigger than the holy tool we had used before. Considering the shape as well, it reminded me of an ATM inside a bank. *The only difference with this tool is supposed to be that you can message multiple parties, but that makes it this much bigger, huh? Rium definitely couldn’t have flown while carrying something like this.*

This really would be difficult to carry around. If we didn’t have the Unlimited Bath, we’d also have had to prepare a horse-drawn wagon. It was no wonder why no one had thought to use this as part of a war tactic before. I had actually suggested this plan while envisioning a tool the size of the one we had used before, so now I felt kind of bad.

In the end, Hephaestus gave us a final message saying, “It seems

beneficial, although we can't imagine how it will work, but let's just give it a try." They thankfully gave permission for their holy tool to be borrowed as well. Apparently, the decision was made right before their army was set to depart, so we had made it right on time.

In terms of operating the tool, Sera and the rest were with us, so it shouldn't have been a problem...but the temple dispatched six temple knights and two clerics to come with us anyway.

"Do they understand that we're targeting the head of the expeditionary force?" I wondered aloud.

"I did explain that, but they just said that it was all the more reason to send the hero reinforcements..." Sera replied.

Sera had attempted to dissuade them, but she had been overwhelmed. Apparently, it had been all she could do to reduce their numbers to eight by arguing that a larger attachment would only make us stand out more and heighten the risks.

At first, the temple elder himself had even said that he would come along. Haruno gave an exasperated laugh when she heard that.

I see. They want to dispatch more people exactly because they know it'll be dangerous—because we're Heroes of the Goddess and under their domain.

"Um, these eight are actually candidates to be transferred to the light temple in Hades after it's built..." Sera added on.

"Ah, now I understand..." So this doubles as a meet and greet to prepare for that. If that's the case, I can't turn them down.

Also, in that case, we should have a barbecue tonight and have them meet Rulitora and the others. There'll be more of the Torano'o tribe in Hades, after all.

"If they have any qualms against being with demi-humans, can you tell them in advance that they don't have to force themselves?" I requested.

"Understood. I'll let them know."

That would only make things awkward for both parties.

To skip to the conclusion—the Torano'o tribe was no issue for them. That was because all eight of them knew Rulitora from when he had come to the temple. The temple had taken care to select their candidates with that in mind. However, the problems were the presence of the demon Yukina, the imp Daisy, the dark elves Brahms and Mem, and most of all, Phoenix.

They had gotten used to Rulitora, so I'd figured they could get used to the rest too, but as I said earlier, I didn't want them to force themselves. We didn't have time right now to wait for them to get used to everyone, anyway.

In the end, three of the eight backed out of the mission. They had been prepared for the Torano'o tribe, but I guess they hadn't expected

other demi-humans to be here too.

I didn't mind since it meant fewer numbers, but the next day, the temple elder sent us a personal apology and another three candidates.

We ended up with six temple knights, four of which were men and two of which were women, and two clerics, one of which was a man and one of which was a woman. We had gone right back to eight total.

"Um, will you be okay? You don't have to force yourselves," I insisted.

"It's not an issue according to our doctrine."

"Doctrine?" I asked them to explain further, and they said that the Goddess of Light's doctrine had a phrase that mentioned "evil beings." There had yet to be one decisive interpretation of this phrase.

"The most widespread interpretation is that all races who sided with the demon lord in the war are 'evil beings'..."

"I see..."

So that's why Roni and Prae weren't an issue. One interpretation from the past had probably gained traction, maintained support, and remained to this day—albeit the demon lord himself had only been focused on growing his economy.

If any of these people start claiming that all demons are evil beings and attack us, I'll protect Yukina with every fiber of my being.

The temple elder had observed his members' reactions to Rulitora and picked out the ones who seemed to have no problems with demi-humans. Though I bet they weren't expecting to meet a demon, an imp, and dark elves too.

That was especially the case with Brahms and Mem—they had been in the aqueduct during the battle in the castle and hadn't stood out, and they'd gone inside the Unlimited Bath as soon as we'd entered the temple, so not many people even realized that they were here. The temple elder had found us the three new candidates with that fact in mind.

"Are the rest of you five okay too?" I asked to be sure.

"We are fine."

Well, this is their religion, so it isn't up to me as a nonfollower to push any further.

On that note, I asked the Goddess of Light about this in my dream that night, and she gave me a rather obvious reply, saying, "Don't decide whether an entire race is good or evil." Common sense, really.

I told the temple elder what she had said the next day, and unsurprisingly, a terribly complicated expression colored his face.

I also asked Sera and the others what their interpretation of "evil beings" was. "Doesn't it mean criminals and wrongdoers?" was the

position Sera and Rin took. "It means monsters who hurt people" was how Sandra and Lumis felt.

After hearing that, I could understand a little more why Sera had been so terribly shocked when she'd learned the truth behind the war between the first sacred king and the demon lord. The war had started due to Jupiter's inability to withstand Hades's trading practices, a problem which then extended to other countries, and those countries responded by attempting to overthrow Hades using military force. According to Sera's interpretation, the truth behind the war implied that Jupiter, and consequently the light temple, had been the "evil beings."

On the other hand, Rin simply said, "Well, I had nothing to do with it."

I guess individual personality has a large effect on how you think about it too.

Anyway, I suppose more problems like this might occur if we build the six goddess temples together. It brought up some new factors for me to consider.

Let's rewind the clock a bit to after we had sent our sixth message and were waiting for a reply. To be more precise, the following happened the morning after we had sent the reply and were still waiting to hear back.

Messengers arrived to call us back to the castle. They already knew that I couldn't move from the Unlimited Bath, so they said that it would be fine if only Haruno went. I asked Clena and Sera to go along as support, and I asked Rulitora to be their guard. I saw them off and remained at the temple.

Unsurprisingly, the sacred family had contacted us to talk about the dispatch of Jupiter's army led by the princess and about the prince's punishment. They had already come to a decision on those two points, so it didn't take much time, and Haruno's party came back before noon.

I had also just finished sending the last message, which was just a final confirmation of our plan, so we used lunch to go over what'd been discussed at the castle.

First, the prince's right to the throne had been suspended, and he had been placed under indefinite house arrest. *So, it's not a total forfeiture, just a suspension. The princess is going out to the battlefield, so I guess they have to prepare for the worst.*

Apparently, the prince had gone into shock after the gift had been dispelled from him, and he had confined himself to bed. It might be more accurate to call it at-home rehab rather than house arrest.

Next, the princess would be bringing the holy tool used for messaging with her on her military campaign as we had discussed.

“Achilles has already started preparing, and they said that they plan to depart in about three days. What should we do?” Haruno asked.

“Hmm. We’ll finish restocking our food supplies tomorrow, so let’s head out in the morning the day after tomorrow,” I replied.

We had to depart ahead of time to gather information to help coordinate. If we traveled at the speed of the Torano’o warriors, we’d likely cover much more ground than the other troops in just a day.

Then, two days later, we departed Jupiter on the backs of the Torano’o warriors. We had to get ahead as quickly as we could. To that end, I first made the reinforcements from the temple try riding on the backs of the Torano’o warriors outside the city. Four of them got lizardman-sick and were down for the count.

After that, we held interviews under the guise of a get-together to select their replacements. That is to say, Haruno and I, along with the knights and clerics that had already passed the test, invited candidates for a tea party in the Unlimited Bath, where we proceeded to interview them.

Of the final eight that we’d settled on, only two were men—both temple knights. One of them was a veteran knight, who was the oldest of the group and very devout. I appointed him as the leader of the temple’s detachment. He sat with Rulitora, Dokutora, Brahms, and Phoenix over drinks and complained to them about how it was hard to operate when the rest of the party was full of youngsters and women. There *had* been other candidates around the same age as him, but they’d all been disqualified after getting lizardman-sick...

The other man was a rookie knight who was apparently immune to lizardman-sickness and had hit it off with one of the young and speedy Torano’o warriors.

The remaining six were all women. They all drew a line when it came to mixed bathing and declined to join us. We set up a separate bathing time for them like we’d done for Brahms and Mem.

Back to the present, we’d departed from Jupiter in the early morning riding the Torano’o warriors. Prae wasn’t riding on them of course, but she was keeping up by running with the aid of wind cleric magic.

On that note, Daisy was sitting in Prae’s cleavage. She’d said that that was the most comfortable seat here. *I’m not jealous at all...except that’s a lie.*

Grasslands sprawled to the east of the Sacred Capital, and a single straight road extended through them. I couldn’t exactly admire the scenery while riding on Rulitora’s back, but I tried to keep an eye out as far as I could see. Wild monsters would run away from the storm

we were kicking up, so we kept running until sunset, not stopping besides the occasional break.

Everyone entered the Unlimited Bath to rest for the night, and that's when a problem arose, or rather, was discovered.

"It looks like there were some attempts to send us messages throughout the day," I said.

"Oh? Did they just get delivered?" Haruno asked.

"No. They couldn't make contact with us, so they've been continuing to try sending us messages. The latest one just arrived."

The messages sent earlier in the day had apparently failed to reach us. I wondered how many they had tried to send.

I already knew that I had to leave the door to the Bath open to send messages using the temple's holy tool, but I guess we also had to leave it open when receiving messages too. The Unlimited Bath blocked interference from anything outside, including magic.

While Clena and the others made dinner, Haruno and I exchanged several messages between Princess Franchellis and the king of Hephaestus to figure out a good workaround.

I wanted to suggest limiting the messages to certain hours, but there were no accurate clocks in this world. *I can use the dimensional gate to buy some cheap watches in Japan... No, there's no way to send one over to Hephaestus.*

In the end, we decided to only send messages between sunset and sunrise for the time being. That was the last thing to discuss for the day, so we finished our transmissions. *Starting tomorrow, I'll be the first one in the bath right at sunset to check on the positions of each troop.*

"We need to leave the door to the Bath open throughout the night," I explained.

"Then we'll need lookouts. We can be on duty," Rulitora offered.

The Torano'o warriors and temple knights agreed to take on guard duty overnight. I had them get into groups of three Torano'o warriors and one knight each and rotate shifts, then let them decide who would be on which shift. I also left the knights in charge of monitoring the holy messaging tool.

In the meantime, we took a bath. I checked on each army's position from the indoor open-air bath. I needed help from people with knowledge on military expeditions, so I asked Haruno, Clena, Sandra, Rin, and Lumis to come with me.

I projected a bird's-eye view of our surroundings on the screen. It was dark out, so lights from nearby towns stood out.

"We're here now... We came pretty far in just one day."

"Hmm, I remember it took half a day to get from Jupiter to that village... Oh, there it is." Rin pointed to a village to the north of Jupiter. "If we compare the distance from there and Jupiter to where

we are now..."

She drew her face close to the wall as she examined it. Her butt was pointed at me, and the hem of her yuamigi was nearing dangerous territory. I felt my gaze being sucked in, so I waded up beside her and inspected the wall as well.

"Aren't we over ten times that distance?" Rin concluded.

"It's all thanks to the Torano'o tribe," I responded.

I returned the screen to a bird's-eye view and looked around for the Hephaestus army and the expeditionary force. After about a dozen times zooming in on lights outside of settlements, we were able to locate both armies.

"Huh, I guess they have to set up camp for the night..." I murmured.

"What are you talking about? Oh yeah, I suppose we don't have to." Haruno let out a laugh.

Traveling with the Unlimited Bath was essentially traveling with your entire house. One of our advantages was the ability to rest immediately without having to set up camp.

After taking all that time to find the armies, it was now time to warm ourselves up in the bath. We couldn't take paper or clay tablets inside the bath, so we used a slab and ink to note down the relative positions of each army. *We should send this information to the princess later.*

"The Hephaestus army is the closest to the expeditionary force right now. Aren't they going pretty fast?" I asked.

"They've covered a lot of ground considering how recently they left. I didn't know the Hephaestus army was this fast..." Sandra said, impressed.

At this rate, they might even catch up to the expeditionary force. Maybe we should start checking on their positions throughout the day during our breaks.

We couldn't receive messages unless the door to the Unlimited Bath was open, but the same didn't go for the others. *They should be able to receive messages during the day. I'll bring this up during our next conversation.*

The next day, we continued to make a mad dash on the backs of the Torano'o down the road heading east.

The princess's army had departed this morning. We'd sent them the locations of the other armies last night, and General Achilles responded saying that they would march at a faster pace than originally planned, so they must have been rushing right now.

I checked everyone's positions again during our break. The Hephaestus army was still far enough away from the expeditionary force that they wouldn't catch up in a day, so the sun set for the day

without any major happenings.

I checked on the armies again at night and learned a few things compared to where they had each been last night. First, the expeditionary force was proceeding at a slower pace compared to the princess's army. The princess's army was rushing, but even then, the expeditionary force seemed especially leisurely.

"If they were aware of what's happened in Jupiter, they would be hurrying a bit more," Clena deduced.

"In other words, they're moving at that pace exactly because they don't know," I said.

Clena had caught the messengers who had attempted to contact Nakahana. It really was true that they had no other messengers. Hephaestus's army had closed the distance between them much more after a day. *They really will catch up at this rate, so we should make adjustments.*

"The expeditionary force is using the main road, so they'll progress along this route which goes around the void." Sandra came up beside me and traced her finger along a plank that had a map drawn on it.

Jupiter was to the north, Hades was to the south, and Hephaestus was east of Hades. Sandra had pointed out a route that went north of Hephaestus, then connected to the road leading west into Jupiter. At the current pace, the princess's army and the expeditionary force would meet slightly after the expeditionary force had changed course to the road going west.

I zoomed in on the projected encounter point and inspected the terrain. Though the void was to the south, the north was littered with forests and hills. *We'll get to that location ahead of time, then keep checking on each army's positions and find an opening to make our move. In other words, we should have no issue with this plan until we reach that point.*

"It looks like we'll be spending the next few days doing nothing but running," Haruno groaned.

To make it clear, running alone used up a bunch of stamina, so it wasn't easy by any means. At our rate, however, we were expecting to make it there with plenty of energy to spare.

We continued speeding along on the backs of the Torano'o warriors for a few days without incident. We reached the projected encounter point before any other troop, all thanks to the Torano'o tribe. It would take the other troops another four or five days to get here. There was still some time before sunset, so it was too early for us to contact them.

After our rigorous journey, not only did the temple knights get lizardman-sick, the sand lizardmen themselves had gotten fatigued as

well. Brahms and Mem looked worn out too. *We still have time before the other armies get here, so we should use the time to recuperate.*

It had been hard to tell from the projection on the indoor open-air bath, but the grassland here wasn't just flat ground; the west side was dotted with rolling hills, and the main road ran along their valleys.

Clena stepped out of the Unlimited Bath and inspected our surroundings. "If we capture that hill and wait, we might have an advantage."

"It's hard to say who will get here first at the current pace," Haruno mumbled as she opened the map.

The map was covered in markings denoting the positions of each army every day. They didn't progress at the same pace every day, so it was hard to judge from this alone.

Well, we shouldn't think by ourselves on this. First, we should gather information on the terrain around us and relay that to the others. I wanted to take a break while we were at it, but...

"Is there a place where we can hide ourselves?" I asked.

Brahms quietly came up to me and pointed north. "That forest seems like a good position."

"Wouldn't that be inconvenient with the physiques and number of Torano'o here? Also, it depends on the commander, but there's a chance that they'll send out scouts to the forest to make sure there are no monsters," the veteran knight came up to us and pointed out.

Indeed, it was a ways away, but I could tell from here that it was a dense and overgrown forest. Not only Rulitora and Dokutora, but even the younger Torano'o warriors would have a hard time moving around in there.

As for the possibility that they'd send out scouts...it depended on who was actually commanding the expeditionary force. I couldn't deny the possibility.

"Don't worry," I replied. "As long as we can hide the door to the Unlimited Bath, we don't have to go any deeper into the forest. They won't find us if we close the door."

"I see. If that's the case..." the veteran knight agreed and trailed off.

This was just a matter of familiarization. It had only been a few days since he'd experienced the Unlimited Bath for the first time, after all.

"We're just in a unique situation," I said as I patted the Unlimited Bath's door. "If you notice anything else, don't hesitate to speak up. I'm just an amateur when it comes to military affairs."

"Understood!"

The veteran knight was one of the few here who had experience commanding troops. I wanted us to rely on him as much as we could.

“Also, I was curious... Say the princess’s army captures the hill to the east. If we hide in the forest to the north of the hill, would it be possible to conduct a surprise attack on the expeditionary force?”

“That would be difficult. There’s too much distance between those two points.”

“I figured...”

I could tell how far apart the locations were from here. If the princess’s army lay waiting on the hill to the east, the expeditionary force would encounter them from farther east, so we’d have an entire army in between us.

“The Torano’o warriors may be fast, but they kick up a dust storm when they run, so they’ll be easily spotted. If we give the enemy time to react, then that’s no longer a surprise attack.”

“Grr...” Rulitora grunted. He couldn’t argue.

So, if we wanted to conduct a surprise attack, we either had to do it from closer or somehow approach them without being noticed.

“Let’s gather more information tomorrow and come up with a plan.”

“We still have time, so that sounds fine,” the veteran knight agreed.

For the time being, everyone agreed to move to the forest in the north tonight.

Skinny trees crowded against each other in the forest. There was hardly any space between the trees, so even though it was still daytime, it was dark and humid within. *The Torano’o tribe won’t appreciate this level of humidity.*

We could easily hide the door here, and the darkness provided cover as well. I opened the door a short way into the forest. I let everyone inside to rest and then inspected our surroundings. I wanted to gather up whatever information we could to send over tonight.

“We’ll be off!” the rookie knight said as he straddled the back of the speedy Torano’o warrior, and they ran off. Those two had become pretty friendly in the past few days. They were pretty helpful as scouts.

That night, I relayed information on the surrounding terrain to the princess’s army and Hephaestus’s army. Achilles decided that from tomorrow onward, the princess’s army would pick up the pace and move to capture the hill. According to him, capturing a hill to gain an advantage was war strategy 101.

The princess’s army was slightly delayed compared to the others, though that was more a matter of where they had set out from. If they continued at their current speed, they would arrive at this location at the same time as the expeditionary force or even later. Basically, by

the time they were going to encounter each other, the expeditionary force would have taken control of the hill already. Also, if they were to send out scouts to the hill, they might spot the princess's army and rush to capture the hill first.

"Should we shift the projected encounter point a bit east or west?" I asked.

"If we shift it any farther east, the princess's army won't make it in time," Clena replied.

"There are only plains to the west, so there's nowhere for the princess's party to set up a base. They'll end up clashing with the expeditionary force head-on," Haruno added.

"That would put the soldiers who are under the effects of Unlimited Love at an advantage, huh," I said.

This was more of a political issue, but apparently the princess wanted to avoid a situation where Hephaestus's army collided against "Jupiter's" expeditionary force before her army could.

Considering that, it was in the princess's best interest to move to capture the hill as soon as possible and set up a base there, just as Achilles had advised. That would reduce casualties too.

Then, my group would conduct a surprise attack as the expeditionary force was caught between the pincer movement. Judging by all the information we'd gathered until now, it really did seem like a bad idea to try to attack from the forest. It was way too far from the projected encounter point. *Tomorrow, let's move a little farther east and see if there's anywhere else we can hide ourselves.*

We continued making preparations for the next three days. The princess's army arrived in the afternoon on the third day and captured the hill to set up a base. The expeditionary force was expected to arrive sometime in the morning tomorrow.

Maybe we could keep moving today and conduct a night attack on the expeditionary force...but the timing is a little strict for that. It's probably a better idea to stay here and wait.

We had already finished our preparations in the last three days. The forest was indeed too far, so we were hiding ourselves somewhere closer to the projected encounter point. As long as we had the Unlimited Bath, we could hide a large number of people in a small space.

It didn't seem like anything else would happen today, so my plan was to have us rest and get charged up for tomorrow. The temple's detachment had used all our free time during the past few days to bombard me with questions, but for today, I was planning to tell them to take it easy.

I checked on the expeditionary force around sunset, and they had

set up camp a little farther away than where we had predicted. *I should report this immediately.*

In response, both the princess's army and Hephaestus's army told us that they'd prepare methods to send messages at a moment's notice throughout the day tomorrow. The princess's army had already set up camp here, but what would the Hephaestus army do? Would they carry the tool while marching? I wouldn't have been surprised with that muscle-headed Hephaestus king.

That aside, it was battle day tomorrow. *I'll check the location of the expeditionary force regularly throughout the morning and report it to both armies. Daisy will be with me at all times so that she can act as a messenger in case anything were to happen.*

Of course, I wasn't planning to take a bath every check since I had to make preparations for battle at the same time. I had to wear my under-armor clothing inside the indoor open-air bath, but by lowering the temperature of the water, it wasn't too bad.

As the morning went on, I took regular breaks inside the Japanese-style room to restore MP. Hugging Rakti made the MP recovery go even faster, or at least it felt that way.

I checked on the princess's army as well. Since yesterday, they had put up fences and had dug a trench in the ground and were ready to be on defense. Even if the expeditionary force made an aggressive push, they could keep the high ground that way.

As for the expeditionary force, they were a bit late getting to the projected encounter point due to their delay yesterday. *They'll probably get here in the afternoon. We should have an early lunch today.*

I was worried that the Hephaestus army might catch up with the expeditionary force. *I should shorten the intervals between messages after they get a bit closer.* I left the rest of the preparations to the others and focused on tracking the expeditionary force.

A bit past noon, the expeditionary force arrived at the projected encounter point. I zoomed in on them, and they were setting up camp, maybe to have lunch. They weren't too far from the hill, but it looked like they hadn't noticed the princess's army yet.

"It's hard to spot that base from below with the way it's designed, huh," Daisy observed.

"I guess they set it up that way on purpose," I replied.

Two groups of two scouts each had been sent out to patrol ahead and behind the camp. The one making those commands wasn't Nakahana, but a knight standing beside her.

"Daisy, send a message... Actually, no, I'll go too."

"All right."

I jotted down the location of the expeditionary force on a map and headed to the holy tool by the entrance. I asked Sera, who had been

standing by, to send the message, and then I started working on something else.

The two of us went back to check the display again and saw that the princess's army had made a move.

"Isn't that the Beast King?" Daisy asked.

She was right—I saw the Beast King and Kannami together. They were going down to the base of the hill. I kept observing what they were doing.

They captured the scouts as they neared. However, they didn't take the scouts back to their base and instead handed something over and let the scouts go. I zoomed in and saw that it was some sort of letter. Kannami and the Beast King returned to the base, and the two scouts hurried back to their camp.

"What, they let them go? Booring," Daisy whined.

"Actually, maybe they..." I had a hunch and followed the scouts back to see them hand the letter to Nakahana. She immediately handed it over again to a knight beside her—the same knight who had ordered the scouts to go on patrol. There were a few other knights around them, but none of them raised an eyebrow at the exchange. I guessed that the knight was the de facto commander of their army, essentially a knight captain.

The knight captain read the letter out loud. Halfway through, the expressions on the surrounding knights' faces changed, and the captain himself started trembling. Then, Nakahana started melodramatically motioning and yelling about something with tears in her eyes, which prompted the knights to start clamoring as well. I couldn't hear them, but all the knights including the captain seemed to be angry.

"Just as I thought..."

"Why are they so angry?" Daisy asked.

"I think that letter is a demand for them to hand over Nakahana."

"Huh? Her army is in the same condition the prince was in, right? There's no way they'd agree to that."

"Yeah, I think the princess's side sent it on purpose knowing that—to make them angry and provoke them to attack."

The princess's army had made all those preparations to defend, but it'd be for nothing if their opponents saw it and backed down. The princess or Achilles had decided to fan the flames and push them to attack.

The expeditionary force had been in the middle of lunch, but it was hardly the time for that anymore. They rushed out of the tent and shouted orders at the soldiers. *So they're going to attack immediately.*

The soldiers hastily gulped down the food they were chewing and stood in formation in front of the tent. That's when I noticed—none of

them were wearing helmets.

The knight captain stood in front of the soldiers and had a fist raised above his head, probably giving a speech. The soldiers then raised their weapons above their heads and shouted something in turn.

That seemed to answer the question—every last one of these soldiers was under the effects of Nakahana's gift. *They'll be tough opponents.* The princess's army had captured the hill in advance and set up defenses, but even with that, they had to make sure to stay on guard.

This might turn into an intense battle. I gulped down my saliva and watched the action unfold.

A squad spearheaded a procession heading to the hill. They made up about a third of the entire expeditionary force. *The princess's army might already have noticed them, but we should send them a message immediately.*

"Can you relay this to everyone? We're going to wait for the right timing and jump out the door, so prepare to move out at any moment. Also, can you help get the Magic Eater for me? Roni should know where it is."

"Got it!" Daisy answered energetically and flew off.

As I waited, the curtains rose on the battle between the princess's army and the expeditionary force. Achilles commanded the princess's army as they used their position to defend themselves as strongly as possible.

They were struggling a bit since all the soldiers in the expeditionary force were under the effects of Nakahana's gift, but Cosmos was backing them up by firing rounds of the Unlimited Bullet into the opposing forces. His extravagant fighting style raised morale in the rest of the troops, and they got to the point where the two armies were about evenly matched.

Daisy came back with Roni, Yukina, Rakti, and Prae. Prae was carrying the full set of the Magic Eater armor. I asked the girls to help me put on the Magic Eater. I kept watching the battle the whole time.

The princess's army was struggling overall. The troops being backed up by Cosmos, Kannami, and the Beast King were doing okay, but the rest were in a bad spot.

This is in spite of them using the hill to their advantage. The ability to power up an average soldier to the same level as an elite knight... Unlimited Love really is a formidable gift.

I switched the display to the Hephaestus army. They were close now, but it would still take them about another hour to reach here.

We couldn't leave until after that, so for the time being, we just

had to pray and wait. I continued anxiously observing the fluctuations of the battle.

I wished I had a way to relay the enemy's movements in real time, but I could only send messages to where the princess was, and it would take time for that information to reach the front lines. We couldn't do anything about it. I took my mind off it by inspecting the back lines of the expeditionary force and sending the information to Hephaestus's army. It was the most I could do for now.

The princess's army was still being overwhelmed. However, Cosmos found opportunities to charge in and rescue any of the injured. Other soldiers took their places, and they managed to maintain their front line that way. The injured soldiers were healed by clerics and went back to fill in any open spots if they were able.

Contrarily, the soldiers of the expeditionary force didn't even flinch or take a single step back. Even if they were injured, they didn't stop advancing and attacking. That was one of the effects of Unlimited Love: they refused to step down for the sake of Nakahana.

The princess's soldiers could tell what harm they'd cause by continuing to battle the injured expeditionary force soldiers and hesitated fighting back. That was one of the reasons why they were being overwhelmed.

What a tricky situation. Nakahana's forces were all incredibly strong too. The princess's army wouldn't last at this rate. I didn't want to think about how things might have turned out if we hadn't planned the coordination strategy with the Hephaestus army.

I returned the display to a bird's-eye view and impatiently watched as the battles continued. Cosmos, Kannami, and the Beast King were doing well to support the front lines, but they were only three in number. The front lines drew farther and farther back. If only Achilles, who was commanding from the rear, could join them... No, that would only be a drop in the bucket.

"This is bad...!" I murmured as I watched.

Cosmos, Kannami, and the Beast King moved to defend against oncoming attacks, which created openings elsewhere. The expeditionary force then concentrated their attacks around the openings. *So their strategy is to distract the three of them, then target the main base where the princess is. Do those three not realize...? No, even if they do, they can't just ignore the other oncoming attacks. Achilles is at the main base, so Nakahana shouldn't be able to seize it so easily.*

The Beast King responded first. He swung his arms, which were as burly as tree trunks, at the enemy soldiers and sent them flying. He mowed down incoming enemy soldiers and chased after a group who had broken through the front lines.

Kannami tried to follow behind him, but he was preoccupied with

a focused attack against him. He couldn't turn his back on them right now.

I know you're worried about the princess, but endure it, Cosmos. The area Cosmos could cover was wider than the other two. If he were to step down now, the front lines would collapse.

I wanted to go to help them too, but I endured it with my fists clenched. If it weren't for the Magic Eater, my nails would have dug holes into my palms by now. The sensation of my MP being consumed calmed me down.

The soldiers in the expeditionary force won't stop until the effects of Unlimited Love are dispelled. Maybe Haruno could go in as a reinforcement... No, that wouldn't work. If only a few dozen soldiers returned to their senses now, it would only bring more chaos to the battlefield. It might even cause more casualties. We can't do anything but wait right now.

The next hour felt like an eternity. I kept clenching and unclenching my fists while watching the battle, and then an army made of a mix of humans and ketolts launched a surprise attack on the expeditionary force's rear guard.

"They're here! It's the Hephaestus army!" I raised my fists into a victory pose and cheered.

Thanks to the information I had sent them, they had managed to draw close to the expeditionary force without being noticed. The expeditionary force finally realized their presence when the attack was launched, but by then, it was already too late for them to react. The soldiers in the main base of the expeditionary force started panicking. They ordered the guards to fight against the surprise attack.

"Okay, let's go!" The wait was over. We couldn't let this chance go. I switched off the display on the indoor open-air bath and went to the front door. "Daisy, go on ahead. Send the message that Hephaestus's surprise attack was a success."

"Leave it to me! We'll send it straight to the princess," Daisy replied.

By the time I arrived at the entrance, everyone else had already gotten the message. Clena, Haruno, Rulitora, the temple knights, and everyone else had already finished getting ready and had gathered together.

"You might have already heard, but Hephaestus's surprise attack was a success. The princess's army should be moving in response to that," I announced.

"We just got a message from them. She said that there are many enemy soldiers trying to retreat, so her forces will be going on the offense," said Clena.

"Good to know. Nakahana's troops probably heard that the main

base is in danger, and that's where Nakahana is," I observed. *That must be another effect of Unlimited Love.* "In that case, we can't waste any time. The expeditionary force might be trying to flee now."

Everyone looked at me tensely. The current situation wasn't ideal, but it was favorable. We had reduced all the threats we could. Now all that was left was to carry out the plan.

"I'll lead the way! Everyone, follow behind me!" I threw open the door to the Unlimited Bath, jumped out, and cast a spell. "Summon spirit!"

The "ceiling" opened in the next moment, and light from above illuminated the slope before me. Rulitora, Dokutora, and then the rest of the Torano'o warriors ran up the slope.

"Wh-Who are you all?!"

"Monsters! Don't get any closer to Lady Ritsu!"

I heard a surprised voice and an angry voice above me. *Sounds like we picked the right spot.* The temple's detachment ran up next, and Clena, Haruno, and the rest followed behind them. I heard another scream, maybe because someone had been surprised at Prae's size. I ignored it and made sure everyone had left the Unlimited Bath, then I closed the door.

You could guess what our plan had been at this point. We had been hiding underground—right underneath the main base of the expeditionary force. I had used earth spirits to dig a space underground, and we'd used that as our hiding spot. All we needed was enough space for the Unlimited Bath's door and for me to summon spirits, so it had been simple work. The earth spirits didn't make much noise either.

When I had gone to the Bath's entrance earlier, I had formed this slope by hardening the earth above us, which was right under their base. All I had to do was open the ceiling, and that completed the direct route to the expeditionary force's main base.

I ran up the slope and looked around us. Rulitora and the other warriors had already gone outside the tent, and the temple knights and clerics were backing them up. I could count on their cleric magic to support the rest.

I didn't see Lumis, Prae, or Phoenix anywhere. Maybe they had gone with Rulitora too. Phoenix was a former demon general: he might not have been trustworthy as a commander, but he was more than capable of raising havoc on his own. *He should be able to protect Lumis and Prae while he rampages.*

Clena was facing a knight who had been shouting threats since earlier. He was the captain that we had seen from the indoor open-air bath. He had handsome facial features and was wearing glasses, but he also looked a bit high-strung. I left Clena, Roni, Brahms, and Mem

to restrain him.

Haruno was facing Nakahana. I took Yukina, Rakti, and Rium with me and stood beside Haruno.

Sera, Sandra, and Rin were facing someone who looked like a light cleric. He was young, but the embroidery on his robe signified that he was a high-ranking cleric—someone called an elite cleric. So *Nakahana's even extended her reach to the temple...*

"Rium, Rakti, take care of him," I said and opened the door to the Unlimited Bath. The two of them quickly ran inside, then Rium came back out with a hose.

"Okay, I'm starting it now!"

I heard Rakti's voice from inside, then the hose that Rium was carrying started vigorously spraying water, which rained down inside the tent. Our opponents couldn't have predicted that attack. The elite cleric didn't have time to dodge, and the water splashed over his head.

"Wh-What are you trying to pull?! Summon spirit!" The elite cleric contorted his handsome face in anger and extended his hand, but nothing happened. He looked at his palm in bewilderment.

It's no use. The water covering you now is magic-sealing water, which can suppress even demon generals. The water wouldn't hold forever, but I expected it to buy enough time for Sera and the rest to restrain him.

That was enough. I faced Nakahana again.

Now then, the main problem was her gift, Unlimited Love. Haruno was immune to it since she had Unlimited Reflection, but the same didn't go for me. I was wearing the Magic Eater, but her gift wasn't the type that caused any physical damage. We had to find some way to prevent her from activating her gift in the first place. And there was one way...

"Nakahana..."

"Wh-What is it...?"

"Let's...take a bath together."

Let me make this clear. I was only planning to use the magic-sealing water to prevent her from using her gift. Honest.

"You barbarian! You won't lay a single finger on Lady Ritsu!" The glasses-wearing captain growled at us ferociously. He tried to swing his sword at me, but Clena drew the Yoshimitsu and blocked him from moving any closer.

He sure is impulsive for someone who's supposed to be a captain...though I guess that's another effect of Unlimited Love. All the other soldiers here also seemed more interested in me than their direct opponents.

The other two armies should be able to fight at an advantage now. I had been afraid that the captain might escape the tent and take command over the rest of the troops outside, but right now, he was

intent on stopping whatever it was that I was trying to do. *Hopefully this is enough to aid the princess's and Hephaestus's armies.*

I hid Haruno behind my back and stood before Nakahana. Since my Magic Eater could guard against most physical attacks and Haruno could nullify the effects of Unlimited Love, this was the most obvious way to keep Haruno safe.

Most importantly, my appearance while wearing the full suit of Magic Eater armor was intimidating. Nakahana seemed hesitant to get closer to us. I guess anyone would be scared if a menacing-looking man in full armor suddenly appeared from underground and invited you to take a bath with him, but moving along...

I had another good look at Nakahana. She was wearing armor over her torso, arms, and lower legs in a way that gave her freedom of movement, and she was also wearing a skirt. Her overall attire was similar to Haruno's.

The most pronounced color in her outfit was white. Her skirt added a round curvature to her silhouette, and she had a lot of accessories. Unlike the clothes Haruno wore, however, her outfit looked like it was primarily for show. You could describe her appearance as an "alternate dimension idol." If you imagined that the knight commander standing behind her might be the hype man type, à la Princess Franchellis, it made some sense.

Nakahana doesn't look like she can fight on the front lines...but I shouldn't underestimate her. Unlimited Love's guiding effects teach the user too.

"H-How about you take a little nap?!" Nakahana thrust out not her sword, but the palm of her hand. I reflexively covered my eyes with my arm. While I didn't see it directly, it seemed like a light had shot out from her palm.

"Wh-What...?!"

"I'm sleepy all of a..."

At first I thought it had been a bluff, but then Sandra and Rin suddenly fell to their knees. I hastily looked around me—Yukina had also fallen to the floor, Rium had dropped her hose and collapsed, and Clena and the rest looked unsteady on their feet. The glasses-wearing commander used the opportunity to swing his sword at Clena, but I immediately summoned fire spirits to fend him off. *Be prepared to suffer at least some burnt hair if you want to try that.*

The only people unaffected were Haruno, who was standing behind me, Rakti, who was inside the Unlimited Bath, Sera, Mem, and I. Sandra and Brahms had shielded Sera and Mem respectively.

"Wh-Why didn't *you* fall asleep?!" Nakahana yelled angrily at me. Her tone contained a hint of distress. She was only yelling at me, not the others who were still awake. The difference between them and me

appeared to be whether or not we had been in contact with the light. Some of the ones who'd fallen asleep had had their backs to Nakahana, so "seeing" the light didn't seem to be a factor.

Sera and Mem were fine because they hadn't made contact with the light thanks to the other two who had shielded them. Yukina had been in the air, so there hadn't been a way for anyone to guard her. If I hadn't shielded my eyes, I might have been in trouble too.

"Is this a sleep spell?!" Mem hit Brahms on the back of his head, which made him tumble over. "H-Huh? He's not waking up! Why?!"

Mem was perplexed. It didn't look like the reason he had tumbled over was because she had hit him too hard. In other words, the cause of his sleep was something other than the spells that Mem had knowledge of.

"Oh yeah, her gift has the ability to lead people into dreams. I didn't think it'd be this direct though!" I said. Basically, this was a power of Unlimited Love. "Haruno!"

Haruno had started moving before I'd even finished saying her name. She went up to everyone who had fallen over and touched them to nullify the effects of Unlimited Love with her Unlimited Reflection.

Needless to say, our opponents weren't going to sit back and watch in the meantime. Since Rium had fallen asleep, her hose wasn't spraying water anymore. The elite cleric's magic was no longer being sealed. Rakti came out from the Unlimited Bath and started spraying the water herself, but the cleric was dodging it with surprisingly agile steps.

"How dare you! Are you bastards from the water temple?!" The drenched cleric pointed at us furiously. He looked a little silly running around while dodging the streams of water, but he was dodging successfully, so we couldn't overlook him. His swiftness was on the same level as a top-class knight.

"Rakti, aim at Nakahana!" I shouted.

"Waaah!" Nakahana shrieked, but she was also dodging with nimble movements. Despite her panicked screaming, she was quick. She had indeed also gained abilities from Unlimited Love.

The cleric looked like he had something on his mind after seeing that, then he clenched and unclenched his fist as if he were checking something. *I guess he just realized that the magic seal isn't working on him anymore.*

"Summon spirit!"

"Summon spirit!"

The cleric summoned light spirits, which I countered with dark spirits at the same time. However, neither of our spirits appeared, and we were only left with the sound of whistling steam between us. The cleric immediately understood what had transpired and glowered at

me.

“That was dark magic! Are you a demon?!”

But he’d misunderstood. Well, there were barely any dark clerics left these days, so I guess he wouldn’t have considered the possibility of what had actually occurred.

“A demon...?” Nakahana looked astounded, but she stared at me as if that explained things. *It’s true that my face is hidden thanks to the Magic Eater, but...*

She continued peering at me while thinking about something. *Does she really believe that I’m a demon? She’d never seemed that interested in her original mission of fighting against the demon lord. What is she thinking about?*

Meanwhile, Haruno had finished dispelling Unlimited Love from everyone. Yukina, Rium, and Brahms had fallen completely asleep, so they still looked dizzy even after waking up. I assumed it felt like the morning after sleeping in for too long, though they had only been asleep for a minute. Maybe time passed more slowly inside the dream.

“Brahms, are you all right?!” Clena exclaimed.

“I-I am fine, Lady Clena!” Brahms assured her.

Brahms looked like he had pulled himself back together already, but Rium was still having trouble. She had never been a morning person.

“Yukina, take Rium and Rakti inside, then get the hose,” I said.

“Got it,” Yukina replied. “Come on Rium, over here...”

All right, we’ve recovered. The cleric had figured out the effects of the hose water at this point, so our aim wasn’t to seal his magic, but rather to hold him back. I trusted Yukina to give him plenty of trouble.

The cleric had grabbed a staff that was about the same height as him that was adorned with a glistening golden insignia of the Goddess of Light on top. He was already in a fighting position. He intended for the true battle to start now.

The commander had also gotten up from rolling on the floor to put out the fire in his hair. He was now facing us with the tip of his blade pointed in my direction. Clena blocked his path by getting in between us, then Roni, Brahms, and Mem followed her lead.

Sandra and Rin moved to face the cleric. Sera stood behind the two of them, and Yukina stood behind Sera while waiting for a chance to fire her hose.

All right, now Haruno and I can focus on Nakahana...

“Hah!”

...I thought as Nakahana suddenly swung her sword at us. I tried to counterattack, but she ran past me to Haruno. Haruno managed to block her first strike, but then a second and third one followed, and

she started getting overwhelmed. I forced my way in between the two of them and guarded Haruno.

Nakahana took a step back, but she was still glaring at us—or rather, at Haruno specifically, with a pretty intense scowl. *Why Haruno though? Didn't she confuse me for a demon?*

“Heh... Ha ha... I had a feeling about you ever since we were summoned here...” she said and pointed her sword at Haruno. She was obviously focusing her animosity on Haruno. “A feeling that you would get in my way one day...as an enemy!”

It's true that Haruno's Unlimited Reflection is the natural counter to Nakahana's Unlimited Love. But Haruno had awoken to her gift late. Had Nakahana predicted that it would turn out like this even though she had never visited Haruno at the temple?

“I mean...those *obscene* tits! You seduced a hot demon guy with those, huh?! I knew you'd become my enemy!”

...*Oh*, that's *what she meant*. I couldn't see Haruno's expression since she was behind me, but I could easily imagine a stupefied look on her face right now.

“Shinonome, you're a threat!” Nakahana exclaimed, then she started attacking Haruno again at the same time. I wouldn't let her have her way though—I absorbed all her strikes with the Magic Eater and protected Haruno.

“My! You're a high-scoring one!” For some reason, Nakahana responded with a gleeful smile. I guess she had gotten over her fear of the Magic Eater after she'd mistaken me for a hot guy.

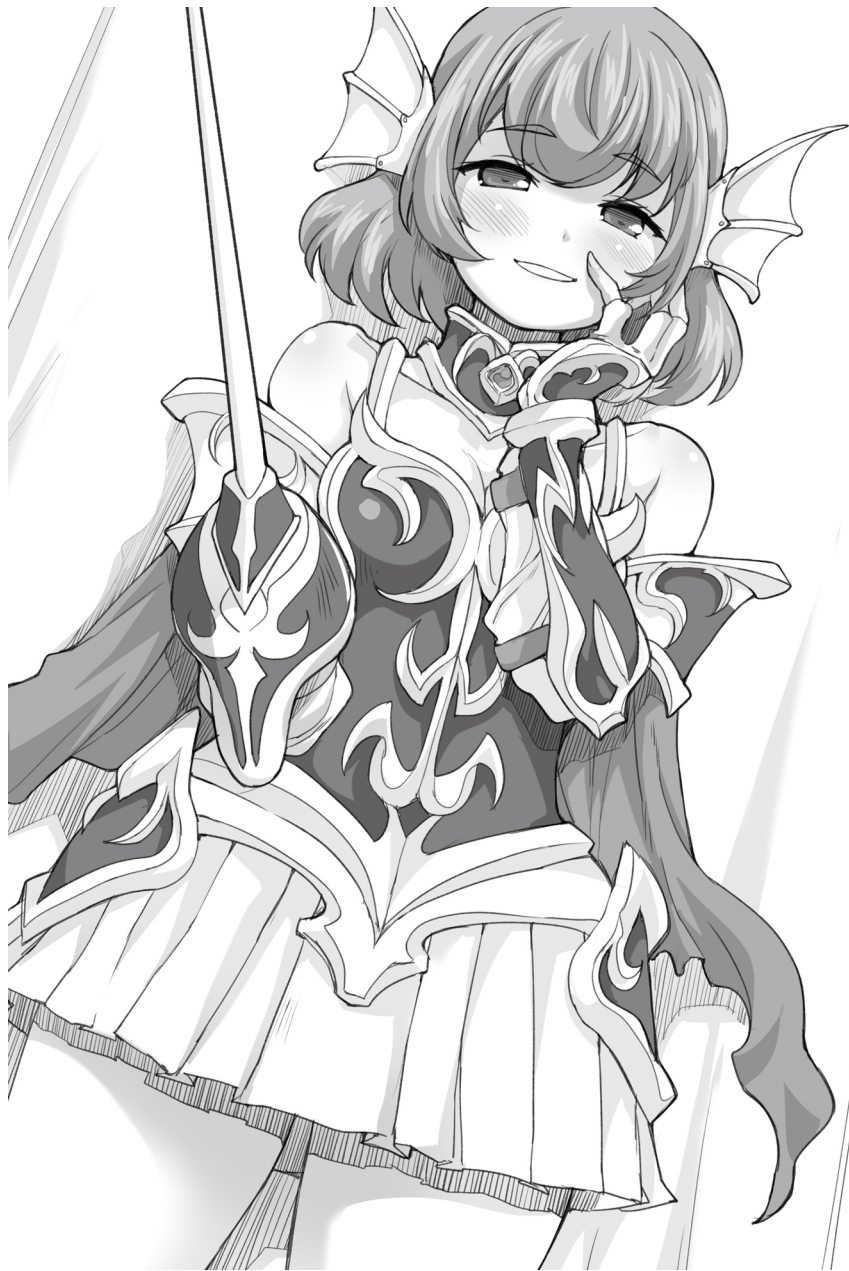
Then, I realized something. Nakahana's swordsmanship was nothing to scoff at. She was levels above any of the knights. *Does Unlimited Love affect people in different ways...? No, that's not it.* “It's because she's a hero!”

Heroes had the ability to grow stronger than other people in this world thanks to the blessing of the Goddess of Light. That was the case for me too.

Unlimited Love could teach the skills of an elite knight to anybody. But what if you combined those abilities with a hero's powers? You would get Nakahana.

In her case, the teachings inside her dreams had made her even stronger. I wasn't taking any physical damage thanks to the Magic Eater, but I could feel my MP being chipped away. It was taking all I had to defend right now.

“Heh heh... I'll repeat your question back to you. Would you like to take a bath together? ♥”



I felt like my life was in danger like I had when I'd faced the demon lord, but in a very different way this time. *This is gonna be bad. In a few different ways.*

"Touya, this way!" Haruno called out from behind me. She turned around and ran inside the Unlimited Bath, then turned around again and said to Nakahana, "The one who'll be taking a bath with him isn't you... It's me!" She unabashedly puffed out her chest as she said that.

"Huuuh?! Size isn't everything, you know!" Nakahana's attention—or rather, her hostility—immediately switched to Haruno.

I agree. Size isn't all that's great about Haruno's... Er, no, that's not the point.

What I mean is, I don't pick based on size... No, that's not the point either.

Anyway, Nakahana was focused on Haruno now. This had been Haruno's plan. I took a step back and Nakahana immediately jumped past me into the Unlimited Bath without even giving me a glance.

Haruno headed to the large bathhouse in the annex building with Nakahana chasing behind her. *All right, now the others should be safe from the sleep-inducing light.*

Next, we need to capture Nakahana. I have to keep protecting Haruno to that end. I looked around and met eyes with Clena. Her expression indicated that I could leave this place to her. I nodded at her and ran after Haruno and Nakahana.

I could have opened the dimensional gate here, but Nakahana wouldn't have been tempted by the view of Japan from within. The hero summoning spell only summoned people without much attachment to their home country of Japan. Nakahana seemed plenty satisfied with her current position, so she had no reason to drop everything and go back. We had to capture her first.

Haruno didn't go straight inside the main building, but instead she circled around it to the right and headed to the annex building. She ran past the fishing pond...but Nakahana was fast! She was catching up to Haruno quickly.

"Those two lumps of fat are slowing you down! Why don't you share some with me?!"

No, that's not the reason. I mean, I could tell how dense they were when holding them in my hands, but Haruno was plenty fast. Actually, the slowest one here was me wearing the Magic Eater. The ground here wasn't made of earth, so I couldn't summon earth spirits to do a spirit dash. *At this rate, I'll fall behind and Nakahana will catch up to Haruno first.*

"Oh, I can use this instead! March of the Water Goddess!"

A current of water started spewing below my feet, which allowed

me to glide forward at a high speed. This was a water cleric spell used by the sacred dolphins I had once fought alongside, and it allowed them to walk on land. It was also one of the spells I had learned in my dreams with the goddesses. I could use this spell inside the Unlimited Bath as long as I was near the Goddess of Water's fishing pond. Haruno knew about this spell too, so maybe she had picked this route knowing that I would be chasing them from behind.

I caught up to them in a flash and went up behind Nakahana. I wasn't intending to kill her, so I didn't use any weapons and instead tried to grab her with my hands.

"Whoa there!"

However, Nakahana nimbly dodged. She stopped chasing after Haruno and instead turned to face me. *Er, why are you looking at me with those sparkles in your eyes?*

"A masked dark knight... Are you perhaps a black-haired nobleman? Oh, but silver hair might be nice too... Hee hee. ♥"

I do have black hair, and I've been mistaken for some rich family's son before, but I'm not so sure about the nobleman part, I thought as I gradually closed in on her. I tried grabbing her another two times, but she agilely dodged my attempt each time. I had even mixed in a feint on the third attempt, but to no avail.

"I'm flattered by your feelings, but you have to be more of a gentleman when approaching a lady!" She even seemed to deliberate whether she might allow me to grab her before dodging. The march of the Water Goddess spell may have been increasing my speed, but she was still one step ahead. However, her attention was entirely on me now. Haruno used the opportunity to approach Nakahana from behind and swing a sheathed sword at her.

"Not so fast!" But she even dodged that.

There was no way she even saw Haruno before moving...

Nakahana turned around to face Haruno and swing her drawn sword at her. *She's fast!* I had figured she'd mastered the sword to the level of an elite knight thanks to Unlimited Love, but her swiftness was in a different class entirely. Haruno was stuck on defense.

Nakahana must have grown as a summoned hero like the rest of us have. I tried to grab hold of Nakahana again to help Haruno, but she kept slipping past me. I thought we could create an opening eventually by fighting two against one, but she wasn't giving us a chance. *What's up with her movements? This is beyond just being fast.*

Haruno continued backing up until we reached the area with the earth altar. Earth spirits dominated this area, so I couldn't use the march of the Water Goddess anymore. Nakahana used my slowdown as a chance to attack Haruno again. I managed to get between them in time, but her attack was unbelievably sharp, and I sensed my MP

drain further.

“Grrr! You have some nerve to hide behind Sir Dark Knight!” Nakahana’s engine revved up, and her attacks grew even stronger. And she started calling me Sir...

“Her attacks are pretty vicious...!” I panted. The fact that she was still swinging at me so violently even after she’d named me so politely was a sign of how much she hated Haruno.

“Is she even stronger than Kannami...?” Haruno groaned.

“Kannami definitely wins when it comes to pure strength, but...”

Something about her speed or her wits put her on top. I grabbed the sword she swung down on me to stop her movements, trading another chunk of my MP. *Yeah, she’s not too powerful in terms of raw strength.*

...*Wait a second.* I realized something after those thoughts ran through my mind. I had gained a godlike amount of MP after continuously generating soap and water inside the Unlimited Bath. In fact, my MP had still been growing since we were using the Bath as a place to live. Since Nakahana had spent time in her dreams to power up all of her troops, she must have used her gift for the second-longest duration of time after me. *What part of her body has she been training in all that time?*

“Her brain!” Haruno exclaimed after a thought. She had arrived at the same conclusion as I had.

Dreams were said to be your brain organizing your memories in your sleep. The sleep-learning she had been conducting in her dreams had resulted in her training up her own brain.

Our bodily strength in this world was reinforced by the strength of our blessing. In other words, Nakahana had trained up her own brain, and the blessing had also given her something like a secondary brain on top. Her godlike reaction speed allowed her to dodge anything she saw, and her godlike senses allowed her to dodge anything she didn’t see. The latter was likely made possible by that secondary brain that the blessing had given her.

On top of that, she had gained incredible physical strength which allowed her to pull off those movements. Unlimited Love was only activated in her dreams, but looking at her now, it must have affected her physical body too.

“No one likes a pushy man! Though I might, if it’s you!” Nakahana jumped up and closed in on me. Her sword I’d been holding between us drew perpendicular to the ground, and my grip on it shifted. The moment my pinky finger slipped off, the whole sword was pushed out of my hands. *That was masterful technique.* I stepped back to brace myself, but she didn’t attack me again and instead turned around to swing at Haruno.

“Blame this on the misfortune of your birth! Don’t take it personally—you can thank your boobs for this!”

Haruno counterattacked, but Nakahana dodged while menacingly glaring at Haruno’s bouncing boobs. I was also dazzled by them for a moment, but now wasn’t the time for that. I tried to grab Nakahana’s waist since it was moving around the least, but she nimbly dodged me yet again. She at least stopped attacking Haruno to do so.

“Save it for later, okay? ♥” she said and winked at me. *No, I don’t think I can save it for after you stab Haruno.*

She was unbelievably powerful. If it hadn’t been for the Magic Eater and my MP, we would have lost by now. In any case, I couldn’t let her attack Haruno. I forced my way forward and stepped between the two of them. Nakahana must have guessed my intent, since she frowned at me. However, I could tell that the scowl wasn’t meant for me, but for Haruno standing behind me.

If I manage to tackle her down, I can summon the dimensional gate and force her through it, but that plan won’t work at this rate. Maybe I can flirt with her and make her drop her guard. I’ll have to see if I can make myself sound suave... I deliberated half-seriously, and then...

“Haaah!”

...a blade made a loud swoosh as it cut through the air, and Nakahana crouched down to dodge it. The owner of that blade was, needless to say, the giant in amber-colored scales—Rulitora.

“More enemies?! ...Whoa?!” Nakahana quickly jumped to the side to create distance between us. However, thick silver spears rained down on her projected landing spot. “Hey! That would’ve been deadly for anyone but me!” Nakahana yelled above her after she dodged with an alarmingly fast reaction speed. I also looked above and saw Rium, who had shot those spears from the second floor of the main building.

“What’s going on outside?!” I asked.

“We are in control now that the expeditionary force has lost their commanders!” Rulitora answered. “However, Lady Sera was worried that the battle here was taking too long, so we came as reinforcements!”

I see, they figured that we were having trouble since a lot of time has passed already. Apparently, Sera and Rulitora had talked after Rulitora returned carrying some wounded soldiers, and then he had come here.

“What about the entrance to the Bath?!” I asked.

“The commander and cleric have already been defeated, and Sera has ordered a group to guard the entrance!”

Right, so they don’t need the hose and water anymore now that the cleric is down, and they can spare manpower for us.

Rulitora swung his glaive toward Nakahana again, and it tore through the spears stuck to the ground.

“A lizard! But he’s got those silver fox vibes! Gah, what should I do...?!” Nakahana agonized over something as she leaped through the air, then toward Haruno again. I wasn’t about to let her do that.

Rulitora and I surrounded Nakahana. We positioned ourselves so that Nakahana would fall into my grasp after she dodged Rulitora’s attack, but she dodged the both of us.

“It’s tough being popular!” She swung her sword in a wide circle, and when I moved to shield myself, she jumped to the side.

I continued watching her move. As soon as she landed, she kicked the floor to launch herself forward at a sharp angle. She was aiming for Haruno, who had been caught by surprise and wouldn’t be able to shield herself in time. However, a moment later, a black gas erupted in between them. Nakahana reflexively stabbed her sword into the ground and forced herself back a safe distance away. *That black gas is...a dark spirit spell, huh.* I looked up toward the statue of the Goddess of Darkness on the roof to find Roni and Clena standing on the third-floor terrace. Clena had drawn the Yoshimitsu.

Nakahana noticed their presence and glowered at Clena. Haruno used the opening to start running away, which Nakahana also noticed before proceeding to chase after her. I followed behind, but she sure was fast. Things were a little different now though. Rium hovered through the air on her flying disc and shot silver spears down to obstruct the path in front of Nakahana.

“There, Lady Clena!” Roni pointed.

“O Darkness!” Clena shouted.

Nakahana sometimes came close to Haruno despite the spears, but each time, Clena shot dark spirits in the direction that Roni pointed to. Nakahana dodged everything, but that reaction speed of hers was starting to backfire. That dark spirit spell didn’t actually do anything but obstruct her sight. However, Nakahana would reflexively dodge anything that entered her vision.

Clena seemed to have been observing us since a while ago. She’d analyzed Nakahana’s movements and had found a weak point—her incredible reaction speed, which allowed her no time to think. Whenever Clena shot dark spirits in front of her, her body instinctively moved away before she could even think about it. Clena used that to hinder Nakahana’s route forward so that she wouldn’t catch up to Haruno. The two of them had gone to the terrace so that they could look down from above, keep track of everyone’s positions, and judge where it would be best to cast the spell. Roni’s eyesight and Clena’s magic—it was a strategy that could only be pulled off with their teamwork.

All right, now for my next move...

Haruno turned a corner around the main building. Nakahana’s

pursuit was repeatedly hindered by silver spears and dark spirits. I ran toward my goal, moving so that the dark spirits shielded me from Nakahana's sight. Clena had noticed what I was trying to do and had started casting her spells accordingly.

Haruno made it to the annex building and dashed inside the bathhouse. Nakahana had been following right behind her, but she stopped just before the entrance. I had hoped that her momentum would carry her inside the bath, but I guess she noticed the noren curtain with the letter 浴 for bath. She was being cautious and took a step back...but didn't make any other moves. She was being slow. Even if her blessing had given her a secondary brain, it was Nakahana herself who had to make judgments.

I finally caught up to her after running the shortest route through the main building. I spread out both of my arms and stood to block her from the route back.

"My, my, look at you panting! You must have gotten so hot and bothered to have chased me all the way here! ♥"

I'm just out of breath. I expected her to jump toward me, but then Rulitora came up from behind her and she backed off. She tried to run straight to her left where the fire altar was, but...that was predictable. A dark cloud burst out in front of her.

From Nakahana's perspective now, the dark cloud was in front of her, Rulitora was behind her, and I was to her left. Her body instinctively moved in the direction that didn't have any obstructions, which was to her right—into the bathhouse.

"Rulitora, Rium, guard the entrance!" I yelled.

"As you command!" Rulitora answered confidently and thumped his chest. Rium nodded quietly.

I ran through the noren to find Nakahana standing still in the changing room. There were massage chairs here, so maybe she was surprised to see them. The door to the bath itself was open, and Haruno was already inside. I stood at the entrance to the changing room, Haruno was inside the bath, and Nakahana stood in between us. Nakahana noticed my arrival and started fidgeting for some reason.

"Oh my, you just keep coming... ♥ Do you want me that badly?"

I let her nonsense pass through one ear and out the other. *She'll probably counter all my attacks even here, so this will be difficult. If I jump at her now, she'll dodge and reverse our current positioning, then escape.*

"Oho ho ho ho, try to catch me if you can! ♪"

However, she entered the bath herself for some reason. There was even a skip in her step. I didn't really understand why, but that made things easier for me. I rushed to follow after her.

"Touya, are you okay?!" Clena shouted.

"I'll provide backup!" Roni followed up.

Clena and Roni also ran inside. *All right, they can guard the entrance to the bath for us.*

I ran inside, but I felt myself slipping immediately, so I stopped myself. *I guess boots aren't the safest footwear inside a bath.*

"Stop getting in my way!!!" Nakahana roared.

When I looked to see how the other two were doing, I saw Nakahana running toward Haruno with her sword drawn.

"The demon lord chose me! Just give up already!" Nakahana demanded.

You've got the wrong guy. Well, I did find this Magic Eater armor inside the demon lord's old castle. That aside, I was surprised that she hadn't slipped while running that fast... *Wait, she did, but she's not falling over?!*

Nakahana looked like she was about to fall over, but she kept running at an angle that made it look like she was ignoring gravity. *What a crazy sense of balance. That must be another skill that the secondary brain is giving her.*

Nakahana swung at Haruno from an unusual angle. Haruno was also wearing boots, so she couldn't counter it. I didn't have enough time to back her up with a spell either. I ran toward them anyway, but before I could reach them, Nakahana jumped toward Haruno, and the two of them collided against each other. They both toppled into the bathtub, creating a giant splash of water.

"Haruno!" I had slipped while running toward them, but I just fell to my knees and continued sliding until I reached the two of them.

"*Cough*, I-I'm fine!" Haruno stood up first. Blood was streaming from her arm. "Though I was hoping to hit myself against her arm, not the sword itself..."

Haruno had countered the attack with her own body. Even Nakahana couldn't have dodged someone who'd jumped toward her after she had jumped down on her opponent.

We had finally managed to get Nakahana inside the bath. She was now drenched in the water of the Unlimited Bath, so she couldn't use her sleep-inducing light. I couldn't let this chance go.

Clena had thought the same thing and was running toward us with a rope. Nakahana noticed her immediately and prepared to counterattack. *I should help by creating a distraction.*

"That woman's also huge— Huh?"

I took off the helmet of the Magic Eater so that Nakahana could see my face. She realized the truth right away and looked aghast. Her mouth hung open and her shoulders trembled. Okay, maybe I wasn't the idealized hot guy that she had made up in her delusions, but it was a bit of a shock to me to see her react *that* badly. However, thanks to that, she stopped moving completely. I had figured I could buy us a

second of time by doing this since she believed I was some hot guy, but it was more effective than I'd anticipated.

"Now!" Clena yelled.

"Got it!" Haruno replied.

Clena and Haruno used the chance to move in. I put on my helmet again and waded through the bath toward Nakahana.

"How dare you..."

"Huh?" I heard Nakahana mumbling something. I had a bad feeling about this. I predicted that we needed to get out of the way fast, so before saying anything, I grabbed Clena's and Haruno's arms and pulled them toward me.

"How dare you trick me?! Play me like that?!"

In the next moment, Nakahana swung her sword several times like she was conjuring up a windstorm. Clena and Haruno were fine since I had pulled them toward me, but the rope that Clena had been holding was now sliced into pieces.

Nakahana looked toward me, and within a second her face contorted in fury. *Oh, I'm still holding the girls... Is she reacting to that?!*

"Die! Die! Diiieeee!!!" she roared—though it sounded more like she was crying out—and continued violently swinging her sword again and again. I let the girls go and drew closer to absorb all of her attacks. "Why?! Why are you getting in my way?!"

Because you've gone too far.

She was chipping away at my MP faster than ever, but now her strikes were consumed by anger and didn't display any of the advanced techniques that she had used before.

"I don't need you! Or either of them! In my kingdom!!!"

Either of them? I know she holds animosity against Haruno, but who else? ...Oh, maybe Princess Franchellis. After seizing the prince's heart, Nakahana had essentially seized Jupiter as her own. The princess had remained as her main obstacle. The princess was wise and had the hero Cosmos as her ally—she was set to take back her own position and her kingdom. The reason Nakahana had kidnapped Cosmos had likely had something to do with that.

"Move, you fake demon lord! I need to kill her!!!"

"Who are you calling a fake demon lord?!"

Nakahana's attacks grew more violent. Was she trying to brute force her way through to reach Haruno? Her momentum was strong enough that I took a few hits to the side of my head. That would've been dangerous if I hadn't put my helmet back on. I could still handle this though. We were still inside the bathtub, so she couldn't move as swiftly as she could before. Her enraged blows were all coming from one direction, so I could guard against them. I just couldn't take a step back. If we were to have stepped out of the tub, both her agility and

her sleep-inducing powers would have returned to normal. In other words, we had to end the battle here.

“First, I’m taking that sword!” I stopped the sword being swung down on me in its tracks between my hands. I gripped it tightly with both hands so that she couldn’t try anything again. She couldn’t cut through me thanks to the Magic Eater, though I felt my MP draining.

Nakahana may have realized that she couldn’t beat me in strength alone, so she let go of her sword and grabbed a large dagger that she’d stowed in the side of her boot. Then, she started raining a flurry of attacks down on me again. Either because she had changed weapons or maybe because she had calmed down a bit, she was faster and more agile than before. I tried to catch all of her attacks, but I couldn’t keep up. I trusted the defensive capabilities of the Magic Eater and forced myself closer to her.

“D-Don’t come any closer!” She kept swinging at me, but now with less strength than before. It wasn’t enough for her to break past the Magic Eater.

Nakahana was trying to move past me and leave the bathtub, but I wouldn’t let her. I extended both of my arms to block her path. She couldn’t outmaneuver me thanks to the water. She seemed to be panicking now, since her swings turned more simplistic. This was my chance.

“There!” This time, I struck back instead of just taking in her attacks. I swung my fist to meet her dagger, but I was a little late and missed it. “One more time! Summon spirit!”

I summoned light spirits to the claws jutting out from my gauntlet. The spirits burst before Nakahana’s eyes and gave out an intense light.

“My eyes! My eeeyyyes!”

I had shielded myself with my other arm, but Nakahana hadn’t made it in time. She was crying out while holding her eyes. I struck her arm and she dropped her dagger, unable to defend herself. She immediately tried to pick it up again, but I stepped forward and blocked her. Her extended hand stopped in its tracks. She stared at me and instinctively took a few steps back. She hadn’t been totally blinded. I had cast the spell as fast as I could, so maybe the light had lost intensity as a result.

“Open! Dimensional gate!” I took my chance and cast the Goddess of Chaos’s cleric spell without delay. A blueish-gray torii gate appeared from the water right behind Nakahana. It could change size like the Unlimited Bath, so I made it reach the ceiling.

“Wha...?!” Nakahana had tried to pick her sword back up, but she yelped in shock as soon as she saw the torii.

She was now surrounded by me in front of her and a mysterious

torii behind her. She didn't know which one to guard herself against...but that wasn't all. A vortex the size of a human appeared underneath the shimenawa rope that was dripping with water, and an image of Japan was projected within it. Water was flowing into the vortex at the bottom, but it disappeared when it reached the other side in Japan. I guess that was because it was water generated by my gift. This was definitely out of left field for Nakahana, so she lowered her guard ever so slightly against me.

“March of the Water Goddess!”

From Nakahana's perspective, I must have looked like I had suddenly grown larger. This spell made me glide above water, so by casting it within water, it made me spring up. I lost my balance, but it didn't matter. I let the momentum cast my body forward.

Nakahana tried dodging me right away, but she was a moment too late. I grabbed on to her waist, then wrapped both of my arms around her to make sure I had a hold of her. Now she couldn't pull herself away from me. She grimaced and was about to scream, but before she could, a large explosion of water erupted from behind me. I poured all the MP I could muster into one all-out march of the Water Goddess. Countless beads of water splashed around me, and I burst forth like a rocket.

“Wait, let me go...!” Nakahana pushed against my head to try to escape, but it was already too late. The water propulsion couldn't be stopped now, and the two of us went through the torii's vortex into Japan.



The moment we went through the vortex, it felt like something dispersed from within Nakahana. I pressed both my hands against the ground to make sure I wouldn't crush her under my armor. I got up and looked at her. She didn't seem obviously injured.

We were in a park. It was pretty spacious, but there wasn't much playground equipment for its size. I looked outside the park and saw several buildings around us. I didn't recognize this place, so I assumed that I had never been here before.

There was no torii behind us, but the vortex was still levitating in the air. Clena was peering into it from the other side. Haruno knew that her gift would disappear if she went through it, so she was being cautious and keeping a distance away.

The sky was just starting to get bright. I supposed it was early morning. Thanks to that, there were no people around us, and we were enveloped in silence.

Okay, we have no witnesses. At least we won't have to deal with a commotion right after getting here. I should leave before we cause any trouble. The water is still flowing from the other side too.

I stood up and spoke to Nakahana. "Can you hear me? You might have noticed already, but this is Japan."

"I-I knew it..." Nakahana replied despondently. She must have already had a hunch about what was going on. Her expression showed shock...but not just that. "I see... So my powers are gone..." She stared blankly into the sky as she muttered that, and there was a hint of relief in her eyes. Her expression was as if she had finally been freed of something possessing her.

Maybe she'd had some awareness that what she had been doing was wrong. If this was her reaction, then returning her to Japan didn't seem like a bad idea. If she had remained in the other world, she would have been labeled as a traitor of Jupiter and wouldn't have gotten off with a light punishment. She must have realized as much, so I decided to leave her here and return. She didn't try to follow behind me, and she just continued staring at the sky in silence.

I returned to the Unlimited Bath and closed the dimensional gate and vortex. The sensation of water flowing away disappeared, and I let out a big sigh. *It's finally over. The effects of Unlimited Love should be gone now.*

"Are you okay? You were using MP that entire time." Clena came up to me and took off my helmet, then touched her hand to my cheek and inspected my face. She wanted to get a look at my complexion to see if the MP exhaustion had taken a toll on me. She didn't have to worry about that, though I was indeed tired. Haruno had started to

run to us, but we stepped out of the bathtub first.

“Let’s go back outside quickly. The expeditionary force should have returned to normal by now,” I said.

“Yeah, there may be a lot of confusion,” Haruno agreed.

We didn’t spare any time to change our clothes and exited the Unlimited Bath. There was a horde of injured soldiers around the door, and it had turned into something of a field hospital. That made sense, since this was a source of clean water. The tent may have been in the way, since it had been taken down.

The battles around us had already ended, and the princess’s imperial guards were busy disarming the expeditionary force soldiers who had surrendered. Most of our party looked safe, but Sera was casting cleric magic on Sandra.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I’m sorry. I let my guard down,” Sandra responded. She explained that she had been holding the elite cleric down, but he had suddenly started rampaging and knocked her away. He had managed to escape from them after that. Sandra had hurt her back, so Sera was treating her now. It didn’t look like a bad injury, which made me relieved.

That had been the first in a wave of sudden changes in other expeditionary force soldiers. They had dropped their weapons and surrendered, cried out in disarray, or disregarded their surroundings and fled. The glasses-wearing commander, who had also been restrained, had turned quiet. He had been incessantly yelling insults at Sera and the others before, but he’d suddenly opened his eyes wide, started trembling, then drooped his head and stopped moving like a puppet that had just had its strings cut. He was mumbling something under his breath now, so at least he was alive.

The timing of their sudden change in behavior probably matched when we had crossed the dimensional gate and had sent Nakahana back to Japan. That was when the effects of Unlimited Love had vanished.

As it had gone for the prince, everyone had broken free of the brainwashing, but their memories remained intact. They realized that the actions they had taken while brainwashed were real. The elite cleric and other soldiers who had fled probably thought that they’d be served severe punishment for their deeds. It’d be up to the sacred family to decide their fates, so I couldn’t deny their concerns.

I looked around to make sure everyone else was safe. Daisy flew to me and perched herself on my shoulder, so I asked her about the situation.

“Lumis and the rest are busy treating the soldiers,” Daisy said.

I looked to where Daisy was pointing and saw Rin, Lumis, five

temple knights, and two clerics busily rushing around the area. Prae had joined them to offer support as a wind cleric, and Rakti was lending a hand here and there as well.

“Wait, where’s the last temple knight? The rookie one,” I asked.

“Oh, he went off with the Torano’o warriors to chase down the runaways,” Daisy answered.

“As in, he was riding on one?”

“Yup.”

The temple knight obviously couldn’t match their speed otherwise, but he sure had become a first-class Torano’o rider. On that note, it had been Princess Franchellis who had ordered them to pursue the runaways. They needed the mobility of the Torano’o tribe to make sure all the deserters were caught. Having someone who could use cleric magic in the group would be beneficial, so it was a good idea for the temple knight to join them.

Yukina and Rakti were carrying hoses and distributing water. Brahms and Mem were guarding the Bath’s door, and Mem was also manning the faucet.

“U-Um, is there something I can do?” Roni asked me restlessly.

“Can you prepare a warm meal? Both for all the injured soldiers and for the people treating them,” I requested.

“Oh, that’s a good idea! Right away then!” Roni headed back inside the Unlimited Bath. Clena and Rium said that they would follow her to assist.

Next, I started to think about what I should do, but Haruno called out to me.

“Touya, don’t try to go around treating people,” Haruno warned.

“Yeah, even though you’ve used up so much MP, you look like you’re itching to use more at any moment,” Clena agreed.

“Okay, but we also need to contact the princess and the king of Hephaestus...” I countered.

“I’ll take care of that.” Haruno volunteered herself to be a messenger. Sandra’s treatment was done, so she said that she would go too.

Okay, I can leave it to them.

“Rulitora, I’ll be helping Roni inside, so go with Haruno,” I said.

“Understood.”

I asked Rulitora to go with them just in case. There might be some soldiers who had pretended to surrender but were still waiting for a chance to strike.

Okay, that takes care of everything. I left Brahms and Mem to guard the door and went with the rest to help Roni.

The Torano’o warriors who had gone in pursuit of the deserters

returned the next day. They had circled around and blocked off any escape routes, then either defeated or captured every last one of the runaway soldiers.

The elite cleric was our problem to deal with as Heroes of the Temple, but the rookie temple knight had already captured him with the aid of the Torano'o warriors. *All right, that takes care of our minimal responsibilities as representatives of the temple.*

After that, Princess Franchellis and the king of Hephaestus decided to hold a meeting, and the location that they chose for it was the Unlimited Bath. I had intended to just lend them a room, but I was asked to join them as a common acquaintance of both parties.

It was the first time in a while that I had seen the king of Hephaestus. He was as muscular as he always was. On that note, Shakova and Mark had also returned to us.

The meeting itself wasn't too in-depth. The princess said her thanks for Hephaestus's reinforcements and offered to take in any prisoners of war that Hephaestus's army had captured. Since I was the expert in gifts, I was there to testify that the soldiers had indeed been brainwashed.

The king of Hephaestus said that Hephaestus hadn't been directly attacked, so he had no issue giving up the prisoners of war. Next, they began talks to decide the reward for Hephaestus in return. This seemed to be a planned discussion, but it took them a long time to settle on the details of the reward.

After a while, they finally shook each other's hand while smiling. Judging by the way they were looking at each other like comrades in arms, I assumed that while the negotiations had been tough, they had come to a mutual agreement. The prisoners of war changed hands, and then each army returned to their home country.

The series of events that had started from Cosmos's kidnapping was finally over. After we returned to Jupiter, it would finally be time to set out to build the six goddess temples in the ruins of Hades.

Fourth Bath — And They All Mixed Bathed Happily Ever After

Clouds of dust formed along the arid road as the princess's army marched back. There was nothing blocking our view—we could see mountains and hills in the distance as well as clouds drifting across the sky. The princess's army was now heading home after parting with Hephaestus's army, and we had been asked to travel with them.

“We can take a bath every night if we travel together ♪” had been the princess's reasoning. *I suppose she can't fight the temptation of the Unlimited Bath.*

Shakova and Mark had come back with Hephaestus's army, so they had rejoined us. Two clerics and six temple knights from the fire temple had also joined our group. Of them, one cleric and four temple knights were ketolts.

Since we were traveling with the army, we didn't have to keep an eye out for our surroundings. In contrast to when we had come here, I could appreciate the scenery while sitting on Rulitora's back.

Meanwhile, Achilles had started interrogating the POWs. All the knights and soldiers were lost in a stupor, but that was understandable—they'd of course be in shock after finding themselves to be traitors of the sacred family once they'd broken free of being brainwashed.

The elite cleric from the temple had been incessantly yelling insults. Apparently, he was a Goddess of Light supremacist and had started going on a rampage spurred by his “love” for Nakahana, and he had spearheaded the expedition to Ares as well as the attack on the wind temple in Thebai.

It wasn't our place to give input on the punishments for the traitors. I doubted the sacred family would handle the topic lightly, so I left it in their hands. The dignity of the sacred family themselves was at stake, after all. On the other hand, I was worried that the case with the elite cleric would have a negative impact on my plan to build the six goddess temples. *I should discuss that with the princess later.*

When the Goddess of Light heard the story about the elite cleric during my dream that night, she responded with a bombardment of gripes along the lines of “Those types are the worst to deal with!” I relayed her words to Sera and the others the next morning, to which they responded by hurriedly preparing a messenger to send back to the temple. The light temple already had the ordeal with the prophecy

on their record, so they likely wanted to avoid getting on their goddess's bad side any further. In the end, Sera herself, along with the rookie temple knight and three guards, rushed back to Jupiter in advance.

We made it back to Jupiteropolis without incident a few days later. The princess had already relayed the announcement of her victory, so a mass of cheers awaited us when we crossed the gates. Crowds of people had lined up along either side of the main street.

The imperial guards hoisted up flags as they rode on horseback between the masses, and the princess sat in a horse-drawn carriage behind them. Following them were Kannami's party, the soldiers of the expeditionary force, and the Torano'o tribe. My party was also supposed to report to the sacred king, so we walked right behind the princess's carriage. I left Dokutora in charge of leading the Torano'o tribe in the back. Of the Torano'o warriors, only Rulitora was walking in front of me, raising his glaive. Looking at his large back, I could sense that he felt proud. Phoenix was walking next to Rakti as her attendant of sorts. We had made him wear a veil over his face and a hood over his head. He seemed satisfied with it, apparently because it made him look more mysterious.

A large cheer rose through the crowd in front of us, maybe because the princess had waved her hand. The city's residents must have spent the recent days in unease—the princess had returned only for a fight to occur in the castle, and they'd had no way of knowing why any of it was happening. This victorious return signified an end to those uneasy days, and the people were celebrating all the more because of it.

There were enough people here to assume that they had gathered from all over the capital. The crowd extended from the city gates all the way to the castle.

On that note, the person receiving the second most attention after the princess was Prae. She must have stood out since she was a giant, which also happened to help Phoenix go by without attracting too much attention.

We entered the castle while being showered in cheers. From our procession, only the leading group entered the throne room. Princess Franchellis was, of course, in charge of reporting her victory. Behind her, Cosmos, Kannami, Haruno, and I stood in a row. Our respective parties were lined up behind us.

Courtiers were standing along the walls. They must have already heard the news of the victory since everyone had a joyous look on their face. Under that bright atmosphere, the princess walked before the king, gave a curtsy, and began her report.

“Father, Ritsu Nakahana has been slain.”

“Aye, you have accomplished an excellent deed.”

We had actually just returned her to Japan, but here, we were treating her as if she had been slain. We could only say that because the effects of Unlimited Love had disappeared after she’d been sent back.

After that, the princess reported the entire series of events. She skipped the part about leading Nakahana inside the Unlimited Bath, but the sacred king nodded in earnest several times as he listened, and the courtiers also let out gasps of astonishment. The speed of the Torano’o tribe and Hephaestus’s army was also included in the princess’s report. That was probably something that Jupiter couldn’t overlook as a nation.

“...And that concludes my report, father.”

“Aye, you have accomplished your duty marvelously, Franchellis,” the sacred king said, and I didn’t think it was just my imagination that he looked a little conflicted. The more the princess stacked up her accomplishments, the more it put the prince in a bad spot. Setting his position as the king aside, it was probably difficult for him as a father to wholly sing her praises.

I could only see the princess’s back from where I was standing, but I could imagine that she also had a conflicted look on her face right now. There was nothing else that could be done though. The princess didn’t seem to want to banish the prince, so hopefully they could figure out a peaceful solution.

After we finished our report to the sacred king, my party exited the castle and headed to the light temple with the Torano’o tribe. I expected Phoenix to kick up a fuss before the temple gates again, but this time, he was quiet. He had apparently sensed danger to Rakti’s well-being after hearing about that elite cleric. He entered the temple before Rakti and looked around apprehensively. The clergy was also concerned about the news that they’d heard, so they just warned him to not cause any trouble and left it at that.

The light temple was our biggest obstacle in building the temples for the six goddess sisters, but they’d also be the most bothered if we only built the temples for the other five goddesses. They were treating us especially hospitably because of that—they were particularly welcoming to Prae, the wind cleric, to the point that she was acting apologetic. That may have been another reason why they were letting Phoenix do as he pleased.

“Don’t worry, I’ll check in on them,” Haruno said, so I focused on getting ready for tonight’s banquet. The temple had offered to host us, but they didn’t have enough space for all of the Torano’o warriors, so

we were using the Unlimited Bath as our banquet hall.

The temple would handle the preparations, so in the meantime, Sera suggested that we take the orphans at the temple to play in the pool. As I waited by the poolside with Prae, I saw some children that I recognized. They were the kids that Sera and I had taken inside the Bath a long time ago. They seemed to recognize me as well, as they all gleefully surrounded me.

The children grabbed on to Prae, played tag with Yukina, and squealed as Phoenix threatened them and tossed them at the Torano's warriors. Everyone seemed to be having a good time. Rium, Yukina, and Rakti took turns grabbing on to me, which the kids then started imitating, and I ended up getting swarmed.

"It feels like you're a celebrity at a handshake event," Haruno pointed out, and I agreed. If we'd had cameras, the kids might have asked to take pictures together too. Well, everyone seemed happy to be here, so I didn't complain.

We played in the pool until the preparations were complete and the celebratory banquet had begun. Our venue was the reception room on the second floor of the main building. Thanks to Sera, the children were also able to attend the banquet.

Large portions of all sorts of different foods had been prepared for us—so much so that we didn't have enough tables and some more had to be carried up from the first floor. A whole roasted pig made its presence known in the center of it all. Sausages and fruits were stuffed inside the pig, which everyone treated themselves to first. The lesser boar sausage was especially popular with the children. I'd had plenty of Jupiter's sausages before I had set out on my travels, so eating these again made it feel like I had really returned.

People from the temple kept coming up to greet me, so I wound up focusing on conversing with them rather than on the food. Having both Haruno and Clena by my side really helped in these situations.

The temple elder was the first to come up to greet me, and he stayed with us for the rest of the banquet. Thanks to him, my exchanges with the rest of the temple members went by without a hitch. *I want to ask everyone a bit more about what they think about the six goddess temples though...* Toward the end of the banquet, I brought the topic up with the temple elder.

"I doubt that anyone will speak out against you now," the elder said.

"You mean that no one *can* speak out against me, even if they want to?" I clarified.

"You're as sharp-witted as ever."

If anyone were to speak out against the subject now, they'd be regarded the same as that elite cleric. *I see. The reason the elder stayed*

with me all this time was to make sure no one said anything uncalled for.

“Are you suggesting that there may be people here who’d attempt to persuade Touya to change his mind?” Haruno asked.

“I doubt there are anymore, but I was here just in case,” the elder replied.

“Well, even the slightest complaint could cause an issue right now.” Clena shrugged. I’d been prepared for a mixed reception to my plan though. I wasn’t so naive as to expect everyone to be on board. “So, that leaves our next problem,” Clena continued, “which is...the appointment of the temple elder for the new light temple.”

“Have you already decided on someone?” Haruno asked, but the temple elder shook his head.

“We have narrowed down our candidates, but not yet. I shall inform you straight away once we’ve decided on someone,” the elder said.

“Understood. We’ll be leaving it in your hands then,” I replied.

Apparently, it was important to have all the other light temples on board with the decision. I could see why selecting someone was a tough process.

The rest of the banquet went by without trouble. We saw the temple elder and everyone else off, then proceeded to the large bath in the annex building to wash away the dirt and fatigue from our journey.

I could smell the aroma of my MP-generated body soap and shampoo from the first-floor bath, and I also heard the sound of a shower mixed with someone humming. The voice belonged to Sera. She was humming a pleasant song, something like a lullaby that she’d sing to the children at the temple.

Everyone went to soak in the cedarwood tub after their showers. Rium and I walked to the tub after I had finished washing her hair, and we saw that Clena, Roni, and Haruno were already inside.

Our conversation topic wasn’t too spicy given the situation—whenever Clena, Haruno, and I got together, we would naturally start talking about what to do from here on. Haruno and I had been summoned here in the first place to stop the revival of the demon lord. However, we had discovered that the prophecy itself had been wrong: the demon lord had revived, but he wouldn’t start any wars, so our “heroic duty” was basically now complete. We had finished dealing with Nakahana too. Moving forward, we had to choose our own paths rather than follow the mission that had been given to us.

Needless to say, my path was to build the temples for the six goddesses in Hades. The first task on my list to accomplish that was to gather back the glaupis and cyclopes that we had left under the care of the demon lord in Ares. We were planning to reconstruct a temple

of wind in Hades, after all.

“One of the things you’ll be accomplishing with this is building a communications network that ties all of the countries in the Olympus Alliance together,” Haruno commented as her two ripe melons floated on the water.

Each of the twelve countries in the Olympus Alliance had to have at least one goddess temple. The holy messaging tool that existed in each temple could only communicate with other temples of the same goddess denomination. For example, if Jupiter, which only had a light temple, wanted to send a message to Ares, which only had an earth temple, they would have to go through Ceres first, which had both temples.

“If the holy messaging tool could be reinvented to work like a telephone, there might not be the need for that...” I said.

“I wonder about that. You can already select which temple to send a message to on it, as long as it’s of the same goddess,” Haruno responded.

“You mean that they already can, but they choose not to?”

I looked down at Rium, who was sitting on my lap, and she looked up at me and said, “You can.”

That slightly proud look on her face is cute. “So they didn’t want other goddess temples to interfere with their own information network...?”

“That’s likely how it went,” Haruno agreed.

Then that should give meaning to building the six temples in one location. It would become a sort of information hub.

“Um...what will we do about the water temple? As in, assigning a temple elder,” Roni brought up.

Oh yeah, we do still have to sort that out. Is it even okay to build a water temple in Hades in the first place? Maybe we should go to Neptunopolis and ask them to relay a message to the gillmen... No, we should contact them directly. I haven’t met any water clerics other than the gillmen, but maybe they have human clerics too.

“I’ll ask the Goddess of Water about that in my dream,” I answered.

“Okay, that sounds good,” Roni said.

We decided on our next steps and finished the discussion. All that was left for today was to rest. I wrapped my arms around Rium’s waist, and she happily leaned back toward me. I also leaned back in the tub and relaxed.

“Hey, no fair!” Yukina flew toward us shortly after. Everyone else gradually surrounded me as well, but the liveliness helped rejuvenate me.



That night, I asked about the water clerics in my dream. According to the Goddess of Water, fishermen and sailors were among her followers, but almost all water clerics were gillmen. The only high-ranking clerics were gillmen, but it would be difficult for a gillman to be permanently stationed in Hades, which was far from the sea. The Goddess of Water suggested that we call for the high-ranking gillman clerics to be present when we open the new temple, but for some non-gillman clerics to be permanently stationed there afterward. She said that she would help make those arrangements, so I left the rest to her.

On that note, this discussion had taken place in a large bath in my dream. You'd expect the goddess occupying my lap to be Rakti...but it was, in fact, the Goddess of Chaos.

The next day, Haruno returned from a shopping trip with Cosmos in tow. The princess and the temple elder had also come to pay us a visit. Right after greeting them at the entrance to the main building, the princess announced, "Regarding the light temple in Hades... I have been appointed to be the temple elder."

"Excuse me?" I looked at the temple elder, who nodded at me. *The temple elder at the fire temple in Hephaestus is the king's younger brother, so I guess it isn't unheard of for royalty to take the position...* "Um...were you a cleric, Your Highness?"

"Technically, I hold the title of cleric as well," she responded.

Come to think of it, she participated in the hero summoning ritual. That was a type of cleric magic.

I asked everyone to come inside so that I could hear more details. The group entered the Japanese-style tatami room, which had become one of the princess's favorite spots. Yukina brought tea and snacks for us.

The princess took a sip of tea, breathed out, and said with a somewhat tired-looking expression, "I am sure you understand this already, but after recent events, my brother's reputation has fallen, and mine has gone up in his place."

"Yes, I've realized," I affirmed. Though he had been brainwashed by Nakahana, the prince had committed treason while the princess had resolved the mess. Of course there would be calls for the princess to become the successor to the throne instead. However, the princess apparently didn't want that. "So, you're trying to get away from Jupiter?"

The princess nodded. She said that the sacred king also wanted to give his son a second chance instead of casting him away.

"I told her that we could continue our adventures together too,"

Cosmos said, and the princess gave him a troubled smile.

Oh yeah, Cosmos is relieved of his duties as a hero now too. The princess had been his traveling companion, but now that she had claimed a victory in battle, her travels were over. She now wanted to get away from Jupiteropolis for the sake of her brother, and the method she had chosen to do so was to take up the position of the elder of the light temple in Hades. She had made this decision not as a member of Cosmos's party, but as the princess of Jupiter.

"I think we have nothing to lose," Haruno said after listening in silence until now.

The candidate for the light temple's elder was important for us too. If they chose someone unfit for the role, the entire project to build the six goddess temples might fall flat. We already knew the princess's disposition, and since she had participated in the hero summoning ritual, she seemed plenty capable as a cleric. She also held more than enough status as the princess of Jupiter, the country home to the head temple of light. Putting everything together, there wasn't a candidate with better qualifications than her.

"Hmm, before I say anything further... Cosmos, will you be going to Hades too?" I asked.

"Who, me? Of course!" Cosmos responded.

He was acting the same as he ever was. I wondered if he even realized that his duty as a hero was over...but that was something the rest of his party could discuss with him. It didn't seem like an issue for now, so I didn't point it out.

"Okay then, we'll gladly accept. Should we stop addressing you as 'Your Highness'?"

"I am still the princess until the temple has been built and I have assumed the role of the temple elder, so 'Your Highness' will continue to do."

I held out my hand and she gripped it back. Her hand was small, but it was a firm and reliable handshake.

"Regarding when we shall depart..." the princess added, "we will be holding a party to celebrate our victory the day after tomorrow, so may we depart after that? I wish to accompany you on your trip to Hades."

"Got it. We'll plan for after that."

We concluded our talks, and the princess's cohort left again.

In the two days before the party, half of the Torano'o warriors, the rookie temple knight, and Mark headed back to Hades in advance to inform everyone there that the battle had ended victoriously. Mark had volunteered himself to go with the rest. Crissa was waiting there, so I couldn't tell him no.

I had planned to attend the party in my usual “son of a wealthy merchant” attire, but the temple elder had prepared an outfit that looked like a fancier version of a temple knight’s uniform for me. He said that I should dress like someone from the temple since I was leading the project to build the six temples. Haruno was attending in a standard dress, so I suppose the only representative of the project was going to be me.

Haruno and I were attending the party to represent the Heroes of the Goddess. Shakova and Rulitora had also been invited to represent Hephaestus and the Torano’o tribe respectively. Prae had also been invited to represent the temple of wind, and Phoenix to represent the temple of darkness. *Are they both okay to invite? Phoenix, especially?* I thought, but apparently, the sacred family wanted to lay the groundwork for reconciliation before the temples began construction.

On the other hand, they couldn’t invite Rakti as simply as the others since she was an actual goddess, although they did ask me to bring her along if I could. Naturally, I couldn’t just bring those three with me without a plan. I asked Haruno to chaperone Prae and Clena to chaperone Phoenix, and I would chaperone Rakti. I expected Clena to be able to handle Phoenix since she was the demon lord’s granddaughter, but just in case, I asked Brahms to go along as her guard.

Since Rulitora was a guest today, I asked a veteran knight from the light temple and a knight from the fire temple to be my guards. I also asked them to help me brush up on my etiquette.

The party was being held in a reception hall in the castle. A beautiful painting depicting the formation of the Olympus Alliance decorated the dome-shaped ceiling. The party today was focused on food, so tables filled with all sorts of different dishes were lined up in the center of the hall. It looked like they had gathered delicacies from all over Olympus.

Some guests were already seated at the tables along the walls, and servants were carrying dishes to them. A tall knight quickly arrived before us and led us inside. He told us that the sacred king would call for us later, but until then, we could enjoy ourselves. However, there were apparently many people here looking forward to speaking with us, so he recommended that we split ourselves up. Sure enough, it felt like the eyes of everyone in the hall had lit up as soon as we’d walked in. We were drawing attention already.

“Well then, it does look like we should split ourselves up.” At Clena’s suggestion, we each seated ourselves at a different table. “If you just remain seated, other people will come up to talk to you. Also, line up some bottles that aren’t wine on the table where they’re easy to see.”

I appreciated Clena's guidance. Hopefully, she would do the same with Phoenix. Speaking of Phoenix, he was dressed in a cleric robe and had a veil over his face, so he looked like a proper cleric. After the party started, he was surprisingly sociable and livened up the conversations to the point that a crowd had formed around him. That was an unexpected talent coming from him.

Haruno—or rather, Prae, was seated at a specially designed table with bigger chairs. Prae was attracting the attention of children as usual and seemed to be enjoying playing with them. Their guardians had come along too, and Haruno was keeping them company.

Rulitora had brought two younger Torano'o warriors with him, saying that it would be a good experience for them. They visited Kannami's table, then walked around to other tables with soldiers and seemed to be enjoying the feast.

Shakova was the most used to these occasions out of all of us. He was famous as a ketolt jewelry craftsman, so he continuously saw various aristocrats paying visits to his table.

Yukina and Rakti were seated with me. Both of them were wearing adorable pale yellow dresses. Yukina's tail was inside her skirt, and the open back of her dress allowed her to extend her wings.

I glanced over at the sacred king's table to see Cosmos talking with him. Cosmos seemed as carefree—or rather, as friendly—with the king as ever. The prince was seated next to the king, but his expression was blank. *I wouldn't be surprised if he's feeling out of place.* The princess was looking anxiously at Cosmos from one table away. I assumed that it would still be a while until the sacred king called for me.

In the meantime, Ricott, the other imperial guards, Foley, Balsamina, and Kannami visited me. I was told that the princess's imperial guards had been disbanded and most of them would return home, though Ricott would come along to Hades. Foley said that she would return home to the forest to give a report then go to Hades. Balsamina would be traveling with her. Those two were more friendly than I'd thought.

Kannami and I talked about whether or not he would return to Japan. I had thought that he fit in with this world the most out of all of us since he was so used to fighting, but he was surprisingly on the fence about returning to Japan. Maybe he had started getting homesick after seeing that it was possible to go back. However, if he went back, he'd lose both his gift and his blessing and would have to start over from level one, so I couldn't just tell him to give it a shot. He gulped down a glass of wine and said he'd think about it again after traveling around some more.

A bit after that, I was called to the sacred king's table, so I walked

over while escorted by the temple knights.

“A high-ranking knight’s uniform, I see. It indeed fits you as a hero, but you must mature so that you may fit the attire of a pastor as well,” the sacred king idly commented. He wasn’t just judging my choice of dress, but rather implying that he approved of my plan to build the six goddess temples.

“I’ll take that to heart,” I replied and sat myself down. A nonalcoholic grape juice was poured into my glass.

We began our conversation with some idle chatter. I recounted some stories from my travels. The king was surprised to hear about my underwater travels in the Grande Nautilus and listened on intently. “Your journeys have been as grand as those of Franchellis,” he commented.

Next, he started talking about my accomplishments. I had learned much more etiquette since the first time I’d had an audience with the king, I had defeated one of the sixteen demon generals in Hades, and I had slain a dragon and received a medal for it in Hephaestus. The sacred king must have heard about all of this from the light temple, but he was showering me with loads of praise. He was probably raising his voice on purpose so that the people around us could hear. I could feel eyes on me. I supposed this was his way of both backing me up and showing that the sacred king and I were on friendly terms. I had no reason to deny him, so I went along with it.

After some more chatter, the king grew silent and stared at the glass that he had raised to his eyes. “You heard that Franchellis will be going to Hades, I presume?”

“Yes, I’ve been informed,” I said.

“Do you approve of Franchellis becoming the temple elder of the light temple in Hades?” the sacred king asked, and he glanced at the prince for a brief moment.

Hmm, I see. He wants a testimony from me that I agree with the princess going to Hades. “I heard that the elder of the fire temple in Hephaestus is the king of Hephaestus’s younger brother. There should be no issue with appointing a member of the royal family as the temple elder, am I correct?” I evaded his question. I had nothing against the prince, but I also wasn’t going to let myself be strung along and side with him.

“That is not a problem. It is an honor, in fact,” the king replied and chuckled.

Was he testing to see whether or not I would have picked up on his intent? It wouldn’t have been an issue if I hadn’t noticed and had given him a straight answer, but if I’d done so, he could have judged what I thought about the prince with my response. I had dodged his question, but not giving him the testimony he was looking for was an

answer in itself.

“This is something I spoke about with the other heroes...” The sacred king switched to a whisper. He went on to explain that appointing the princess as the new temple’s elder was so that the sacred family could send a message that building a light temple in Hades wasn’t an issue for the Goddess of Light’s creed.

That made sense. It would be a bad look if we’d finished building the temple but then it was abandoned for whatever reason. Appointing a member of the sacred family as the temple elder provided it more legitimacy and more reassurance that the temple would continue operating. However, that also meant that the princess didn’t have to stay appointed as the temple elder for long. She would still be available as backup in case the prince wasn’t able to regain his glory.

“It is much easier to talk to a Hero of the Goddess about this,” the sacred king said with a laugh, probably noticing how far I had read into his plans.

True. Haruno would have probably offered him the perfect responses to this conversation with a smile. On the other hand, Kannami might’ve struggled to keep up, and Cosmos might have started talking about something else entirely.

Anyway, I had a good idea of the king’s line of thinking now. First, he wanted to know what we thought of the prince; he figured there was a chance our responses to his probing could bolster the prince’s standing. Also, he alluded that it was possible for him to call the princess back to Jupiter. He was basically sending us the message that he was giving the prince another chance, but he hadn’t completely forgiven him yet. If the sacred king had thought that far ahead, then I had nothing more to say. The prince’s future would lie in his own hands from here on out.

We returned to friendly chatter after that, but this time, the king tried to involve the prince more in our conversations. My impression after talking with the prince was that he was still going through a lot. I expected him to have a tough road ahead, but I wished him the best.

There was nothing left for me to be tense about after ending my conversation with the king, so I went back to enjoying the banquet. Cosmos started singing and dancing in the middle of the hall, but that hardly counted as trouble. It was a great hit with the guests, in fact. Cosmos was in a league of his own since he could act like that without a drop of alcohol in him. He helped enliven the party, and overall, the party was considered a great success.

A few days later, it was time to depart to Hades. Joining my party were the Torano’o warriors, clerics and knights from the light temple,

and clerics and knights from the fire temple. Cosmos and the princess's party also joined us, except for Foley and Balsamina, who had departed to the elf forest yesterday. Kannami said that he would travel with us to Hades for now, so his party also tagged along.

The Unlimited Bath was packed with food and supplies for the trip. This time, the city saw us off on our journey. The temple elder, children from the temple, merchants we had done business with, the former members of the imperial guard, the sacred king, and the prince had all come to the gate to bid us farewell.

We departed Jupiteropolis with cheers to our backs and headed toward Hades. This was a much more leisurely trip compared to last time, so we exchanged friendly chatter as we progressed. After we entered the underground tunnel in the middle of the mountains, it was a straight road back. We used light spirits to light our way and wind spirits to ventilate the tunnel.

We arrived in Hades after an easy trip, then we reconvened with the people who were already there. We went to the plaza with the statue of the demon lord to find that it had already been turned into a Torano'o settlement. They knew that I would be back and had transformed the area into a livable environment. Pardoe, who had remained here, had fixed up some buildings so that they could be used again, including the old temple of darkness. He was now working on clearing all the rubble from the aqueducts. According to Pardoe, however, his reinforcements were only temporary. He said that if we really wanted to rebuild this place, then we would need to call earth clerics, who were experts in construction.

The courtyard in the old temple of darkness had turned into a playground for the children. Phoenix tried shoos them off by yelling, "You're going to hell for this!" but he stopped after Rakti allowed them to play. He even started cleaning the inside of the temple with the children later.

Now then, we should unload the supplies from inside the Unlimited Bath. We had taken a lot with us, so I opened the door to the Bath in the middle of the plaza and had our supplies distributed around the settlement.

As I watched the Torano'o tribe help carry the supplies around, I had a thought. "Oh yeah, isn't it about time you stop being a raver, Rulitora?" Until now, I had never thought of him as a raver and I'd just treated him like another member of my party; nonetheless, if you considered our time together from that lens, he had served me plenty, so it seemed like a good idea to end his term now.

"No, I am still fine for now... If I were to end my term now, wouldn't I gain citizenship to Jupiter?" Surprisingly, Rulitora rejected my offer fairly quickly. *I guess he's in no rush for that reward right now. I*

should ask Clena for her input.

“Hmm. It’d be possible to transfer his citizenship later, but how about you make him the first citizen of Hades once you can do so?” Clena suggested.

“I see! That’s a great idea!” Rulitora was right on board. He said that the timing would work perfectly for him.

“Oh, and make Roni citizen number two.” Clena had also been planning to end Roni’s term of servitude after the restoration of Hades. It sounded like Clena was planning to transfer her own citizenship to Hades too.

I looked up, and it felt like the majestic statue of the demon lord was looking down at me. It didn’t have to be now, but I needed to start thinking about those things too. I felt the weight of the deed to Hades that had been given to me all over again.

“I should start carrying this with me as a reminder...” Ever since that day, I would always affix the Hoshi-kiri that the demon lord had given me to my waist. It served as a manifestation of my will as the successor of Hades.

The next morning, we went through the southern tunnel and set sail to bring back the cyclopes and glaupis in Ares. There was still plenty to do, so the only people traveling with me were my party and Haruno’s party.

“We shall remain here,” the princess said. Cosmos and the princess’s party worked on setting up tents with the Torano’o tribe so that they could practice living together. It was the princess’s way of familiarizing herself with her new life here. Kannami also said that he would make this his main base for the time being. He was a reliable person to have with them.

We boarded the Grande Nautilus and set sail to Ares. Pardoe, Shakova, Mark, and Brahms—who had recently learned the ropes—took turns steering the ship. The voyage to Ares went without incident. We took leisurely baths, enjoyed fresh seafood, and waved at giant marine animals swimming alongside us from the deck. It was a refreshing trip. Prae was especially overjoyed at the idea of seeing her comrades again and was full of smiles.

Our serene voyage continued for a few days until we arrived in Ares. We first visited the temple of earth and the Ares royal family, then the demon lord at the White Orchid Corporation.

At the temple, I reported that we had carried out our duty as heroes and that we were to build the six goddess temples in Hades. I also requested that they dispatch clerics to aid us in building the temples. The temple was more than on board with my plan and sent over a dozen clerics our way. They said that the earth temple couldn’t

miss out on such a major historical event as this.

We visited the Ares royal family next and reported likewise. However, they gave us an unexpected response.

“What? The princess will be the elder for the new earth temple?”

We had arrived at the White Orchid Corporation and relayed the news to the demon lord, who was now leaning forward and echoing the news I’d just given him. Ares’s royal family had two children, and since the younger princess wasn’t the successor to the throne, she had been appointed as the new temple’s elder.

“Did the prince do anything reckless here recently, by any chance?” I asked.

“No, not that I’ve heard of. They must be regarding the temple—no, the restoration of Hades—with great significance,” the demon lord responded.

“Because of their past relations with Hades?”

“I doubt that is the only reason...”

The White-Faced Ogre explained that Ares might be thinking about their potential future status. They were thinking ahead to how they would ally with Hades after its revival and wanted to secure a degree of influence there. Since the princess of Jupiter would also be there, maybe this would provide a good balance.

“Don’t forget who is supposed to be the king, now,” the demon lord admonished me.

“...Me?” I replied.

“I am fine with Clena as well.”

“I won’t push that role onto her. I’ll be the one to take on all the responsibility,” I insisted.

“Ohh!” “How absolutely trustworthy!” “Was that a proposal?” The White-Faced Ogre, Demon Dog, and Flame Devil all whistled at me. Clena’s ears had gone red, and she cleared her throat to stop their cheering, but it didn’t have any effect.

She might implode if this continues, so let me bring the conversation back on track. “Anyway, the princess won’t be traveling with us, of course. But after we finish making preparations, we can bring everyone we’ve left here back to Hades. Thank you for hosting them all this time.” I bowed to the demon lord. Clena hastily bowed too after seeing me. (As a side note, it was decided some days later that the princess of Ares would travel to Hades on a ship loaded with supplies.)

“I don’t mind, but...are you ready to bring them back now?” the demon lord asked. “That place is nothing but ruins.”

“I have the Unlimited Bath, so we can make do.”

“You can’t move if you use that. Build housing first, then the

temples.” It was straightforward advice, and he was absolutely right, so I simply nodded in response.

After that, we talked more, and he offered his perspective as a former ruler. Some of it was personal complaints, but all of it was useful information for me. I made sure to take in as much as I could.

We finished restocking on food over the next two days, then we set sail again. Our return voyage went by without incident. All of our supplies were inside the Unlimited Bath, so as soon as we’d arrived back at the hidden port, we were able to begin traveling through the southern underground tunnel back to Hades. We had a lot of people with us this time, so we went slowly.

The tunnel was pretty long and tedious to go through. I wanted to establish something like the gembolic wagons in Ares here in the future. But first, we had to build residences. We needed housing for the clerics we had taken with us too.

Once we arrived back in Hades, I decided to relay the news about the earth temple’s elder to everyone. “So, the princess of Ares has been appointed as the elder for the temple of earth.”

“Did you tell them that I will also be a temple elder?” The princess was the first to voice concerns. She probably thought that the royal family in Ares had appointed the princess to rival her.

“I didn’t, so I don’t think her appointment’s related.”

“In that case, is Ares trying to gain influence over Hades...?” The princess started mumbling something, but I disregarded her and asked everyone to unload the supplies we had brought from Ares. During our travels, the others had performed checks on the buildings that seemed repairable, so I wanted to ask the earth clerics to get started on mending them as soon as possible.

“Did anything happen while we were gone?” I asked.

“Yeah, some water clerics arrived. They’re all the Kannami type,” Cosmos responded.

Apparently, the water clerics were all muscular humans. They must have been the first wave of non-gillman clerics that the Goddess of Water had said that she would send.

We now had clerics of light, fire, wind, water, earth, and darkness all gathered here—albeit their numbers were imbalanced thanks to there being several earth clerics yet only one wind cleric and one darkness cleric. In any case, we could officially start building the temples for the six goddess sisters now.

We had other work to consider in the meantime though. Namely, we needed to determine how we’d obtain food for the time being as well as how we would trade. I decided to leave those matters to Rulitora, who was used to dealing with humans, and the rest of the

Torano'o tribe.

There were several buildings here that still retained their original shapes. I asked the earth clerics to inspect them and repair any buildings that we could still use with cleric magic. That was our quickest way of securing housing. I had thought that all the buildings around the plaza with the demon lord's statue were fine...but then I was told that the old temple of darkness was no good.

According to the earth clerics, the temple was just barely irreparable. *Thank goodness it didn't collapse on us back when we camped inside.* However, Phoenix started shutting himself inside the temple, not allowing it to be destroyed.

"Let's leave him be for now. It is a temple, so I don't think we can get him to change his mind anytime soon."

I remembered that there was a ceremony called "senguu" that was performed to relocate a deity when a shrine was being repaired. I had seen it on TV before. *I can probably convince Phoenix to move out by asking him to perform that ceremony himself later. But first, we have to demolish any buildings beyond repair and secure some land. It's time for my earth spirit magic to get to work.*

We had our people and our supplies, so it was finally time for the construction of the temples—or rather, the restoration of Hades—to be set in motion.

The next month passed in the blink of an eye. Around the time we finished tearing down all of the unusable buildings (besides the demon lord's castle and the temple of darkness) to secure plots of land, the princess of Ares arrived in Hades. We had already finished repairing the buildings we had chosen to keep and reinforcing all of the underground tunnels going north, south, east, and west. Thanks to that, the princess's group had enjoyed a smooth trip here from the port. The group of Torano'o who had gone out to trade had recently returned too, so it was good timing.

The princess appeared to be a young and gentle dark elf, but she also had the air of an affectionate grandmother. Foley, who had also returned the other day, said that those types of elves were pretty common. Apparently, elves tended to develop that disposition if they spent a lot of time around beings with shorter life spans. The princess and her entourage had brought gembolic-drawn wagons and drivers assuming that we would need them, which I appreciated.

Now that all six candidates for temple elder are here, we should meet and decide where to build each temple.

Phoenix was barricading himself inside the temple of darkness as usual. I managed to drag him outside, promising him that we wouldn't destroy the temple while he was out, and began discussions inside the reception room of the Unlimited Bath. Rakti and Sera sat beside me as

advisers.

Now then, we had two options regarding where to build the temples: underground, like the temple in Ares, or all together in this caved-in space. Sixteen towers had collapsed to form a dome-like ceiling that sheltered the cavity where we were currently. The destruction had preserved the demon lord's castle and the surrounding area known as the city center, but there wasn't enough space to build all six temples with room to spare here.

The temple elder candidates knew that, so they were considering how to build all the temples underground. They were currently discussing which direction each temple should face. Princess Franchellis was aiming for the north in the direction of Jupiter, while Prae said that she wanted the temple to peek a bit above ground so that wind could pass through it. However, I had more forward-thinking ideas, so I decided to argue we should build the temples together.

"Would it be possible to build the temples all together where the demon lord's castle is?" I asked, which made everyone look at me.

"You mean...make the temples connected?" Princess Franchellis returned my question with another.

"I'm thinking of building one large building then dividing it up inside."

The two princesses looked at each other. All the other temple elder candidates seemed perplexed... Well, I couldn't tell what Phoenix's expression was, but he was rattling his teeth as if he was distressed.

Prae was the only one who didn't seem bothered; she simply said "the wind blows anywhere" and didn't seem to have any concerns about how far her temple would be from the others.

I did have a reason for my suggestion. "I'm thinking about the role Hades will play moving forward," I said, glancing at Princess Franchellis and Sera. "It'll become a place that can produce people capable of receiving prophecies—or rather, it will serve as a foundation for such people to exist in the first place."

The moment I said that, the two of them slightly twitched. They hadn't been able to comprehend the prophecy, and thanks to their incorrect interpretation, the heroes had been summoned. I wasn't going to blame them for that after all this time, but I wanted to prevent it from happening again.

"According to the goddesses, to comprehend a prophecy, you need both a great amount of MP and multiple goddess blessings," I further explained.

"I understand the MP aspect," Princess Franchellis replied. "After my father received the prophecy, he was so tired that he could not

even get up, even though he had only perceived it in fragments. However, I have not heard about blessings from multiple goddesses...”

I didn’t understand the exact reasons either, so I glanced at Rakti.

“It’s like...by deepening your bonds with more of us, you become closer to us,” Rakti explained.

“She doesn’t mean physical distance, but the amount of MP you need to receive a prophecy,” I clarified.

“Then why was San Pilaca unable to receive any prophecies?” Princess Franchellis asked. She was referring to the first sacred king’s comrade, who had five blessings—all except darkness.

“You are closest to us in your dreams, and dreams are my sanctuary,” Rakti answered.

“In other words, obtaining the blessing of darkness lowers the amount of MP you need to receive a prophecy tremendously,” I added. I could meet the goddesses in my dreams, and I was even able to touch them. However, it didn’t seem one needed to go that far to receive a prophecy, so the process wouldn’t require as much MP as I had.

“But Sir Touya, I heard that the blessing of darkness will transform you into a demon...” Princess Franchellis said.

“If you also have the blessing of light, they’ll cancel each other out. Though you’ll also need another blessing to prevent any adverse reactions. That’s why I haven’t transformed into a demon,” I explained.

“Oh, the light blessing needs to be strong too!” Rakti hastily added. Everyone looked toward Princess Franchellis. Maybe they were thinking that as the new light temple’s elder, she might have the capability to take in the darkness blessing.

“*Ahem*, I understand now.” Perhaps feeling a little awkward, Princess Franchellis cleared her throat and redirected the conversation. “However, I have heard that you must possess a great amount of power to be granted the blessings of multiple goddesses. I must point out that you are a hero. I have doubts that others can reach the same capabilities as you.”

We heroes had stronger blessings of light than others in this world, so we could also grow stronger more easily.

“That’s fair,” I responded. “If you could produce a cleric strong enough to receive prophecies just by bringing the six temples together, the world wouldn’t have gone through so many problems.”

Everyone seemed to agree, as the fire and water temple elder candidates nodded in unison. Followers of the Goddess of Water didn’t need to receive prophecies since they could meet her directly, but that was beside the point.

Throughout my travels, I had visited a few countries that had

multiple temples. A cleric at the earth temple in Ceres had been the first to recommend that I receive blessings from multiple goddesses. However, the cleric himself didn't have enough MP, so he'd only had one blessing. I hadn't heard of anyone besides San Pilaca and me who had received multiple blessings. There wasn't much we could do about the MP requirements. I knew that I was a bit superhuman in that regard.

"Also, even if someone powerful enough was born, would that person be open to being granted multiple blessings?" Princess Franchellis questioned.

Receiving multiple blessings wasn't an issue in itself, but until now, no one had made an attempt to do so. Maybe it wasn't my argument to make since I had only gotten the blessings to level up the Unlimited Bath, but I was sure those friendly goddess sisters wouldn't want their people to remain so distant. The Goddess of Light had continuously sent her prophecy in order to save Rakti, after all.

"If we build a temple to bring all the goddesses together here, I think people's attitudes will gradually change. That's what I was referring to with the 'foundation' that I mentioned earlier," I answered. This alone wouldn't solve everything, but it would be one step toward changing the future.

The temple elder candidates remained silent for a while. Perhaps they had never even considered the idea before. Then they began discussing it among themselves, minus Prae and plus Sera. Even Phoenix was contributing his opinions. I called Prae over and sat leaning my back against her as she sat cross-legged, then brought Rakti on top of my lap to hug as we waited for the discussion to be finished.

"...All right then. We shall go with your plan," Princess Franchellis concluded.

After a long discussion, they decided to go with my idea. They concluded that while attempting to combine all of the goddess faiths into one religion was out of the question, there was no problem in being the forerunners to allow all the temples to coexist in mutual prosperity.

"Miss Rakti hardly looks like the type who would bring harm," Princess Franchellis added.

Rakti had apparently been the deciding factor. After hearing the princess's words, Rakti turned around to face me from atop my lap and broke out into a wide grin. I instinctively patted her head and then spoke to everyone else.

"A temple where all of the goddesses are gathered together... Let's call it the Pan-Temple. We can split up the sections for each goddess so that they form a circle. It'll be hexagon-shaped... No, maybe

hexagram-shaped?" I pondered.

"How shall we order ourselves? Personally, I would prefer it if the Goddess of Light is to the north..."

"I don't have anything to suggest when it comes to cardinal directions, but if the Goddess of Light comes first as the eldest sister, then the Goddesses of Fire, Wind, Water, Earth, and Darkness would follow."

"That's our order from oldest to youngest," Rakti confirmed.

"And the center of the temple would serve as a junction to the rest."

Everyone agreed to the order without debate. Maybe they didn't see it as an issue compared to combining all of the temples into one.

Lastly, I needed to address the issue of Phoenix barricading himself inside the temple of darkness. I figured he'd be happy if we carried out a ritual to officially relocate where the Goddess of Darkness was to be worshipped, or in other words...

"Phoenix, can you perform a senguu ceremony from the old temple to the new temple? Do you know what a senguu ceremony entails?" I asked.

"Hmm... A senguu ceremony, eh? I know what that is, but there's no object of worship in the temple to perform the ceremony with. I don't know how to do it without one."

"Since this will be the first senguu ceremony, whatever method makes Rakti happy can be regarded as the official process."

"I see! Then I'll start planning one out!" Phoenix agreed enthusiastically.

Okay, I got him on board. That takes care of the barricading issue. I should keep an eye on him so that he doesn't take it too far though.

That was the last of what we needed to talk about. I was about to dismiss our meeting, but then Phoenix spoke up.

"If we're going to build a new temple, shouldn't there be a groundbreaking ceremony? Who's going to perform that?" Phoenix asked.

A groundbreaking ceremony, huh? I hadn't thought about that. I asked the others about it, but they said that they had no such ceremonies in this world. Still, since we were going to build the world's first Pan-Temple to enshrine all the goddesses, maybe it was also a good idea to hold the world's first groundbreaking ceremony to pray for the safety and success of the project.

A groundbreaking ceremony, or a jichinsai as it was called in Japan, was a ceremony performed before construction to gain permission from the gods to use their land. It was also meant as a prayer for the construction to reach its conclusion safely.

I explained all of that to everyone, and they agreed that it

sounded like a good idea. They said that I should be the one to perform the ceremony since I was the one leading the restoration of Hades.

“Hmm. We can also use this to spread word about the construction of the Pan-Temple and the restoration of Hades,” said the princess of Ares.

“Let us make this a large event. I shall invite my father as well,” said Princess Franchellis.

Phoenix and I had only thought about conducting the ceremony for Rakti’s sake, but the other temple elder candidates went beyond that. They were thinking of using it as a way to majorly promote the restoration of Hades. *True, there are some countries that we haven’t contacted about this yet. We can invite those countries to the groundbreaking ceremony and officially announce the restoration of Hades. After all, they might get needlessly wary if the country of the former demon lord were suddenly revived completely unbeknownst to them—especially Ceres in the west.*

“But will the other countries really come if we tell them that we’re going to restore the country of the former demon lord...?” I wondered.

“It will be fine if we use the temples to contact them,” Princess Franchellis reassured me.

“Okay, then let’s sign the message with the names of all six future temple elders and my own.”

We didn’t have a holy messaging tool for the new temple here yet, so we were going to have to ask each of the temples to send the message for us. That was something I could leave in each temple elder candidate’s hands.

“We should invite the leaders of each country,” suggested Princess Franchellis.

“We will also need to invite all the temple elders. Perhaps not of every temple, but at least all the major ones,” the princess of Ares added.

I’m a little worried about the guest list, so I’ll ask Clena for her input later. We have a limited amount of space in Hades right now, even if we use the Unlimited Bath.

I needed to plan out the exact proceedings of the groundbreaking ceremony. Since the temples didn’t have any precedents to offer, I asked the goddesses in my dream instead. Rather than asking them what the exact steps should be, I offered ideas for them to give their feedback. I also asked Haruno and Phoenix for their ideas during the day.

Meanwhile, I worked on demolishing the former demon lord’s castle. I had been putting it off since half of it had already collapsed

and it was dangerous to go inside, but we couldn't start construction work until it was done. I asked the earth clerics for help to make sure I was working safely, and I gradually made progress. It turned out I would need over a month to finish the demolition even with magic. However, everyone else was plenty busy preparing for the ceremony; when I told everyone my timeline, they responded that I could go a little slower since it would take even longer than that to coordinate all of the invitees' schedules. *In that case, I'll make sure to work slowly and carefully. Safety first.*

It had been a month since I'd started dismantling the castle starting from the top, and I'd made it about halfway through. I could have gone a little faster, but I'd been wanting to save MP for everyone's leisure time—our bath time.

I was no exception to using the Unlimited Bath to rejuvenate either. Tonight, I'd gone inside the bath with the usual faces. Clena was sticking closer to me today than she usually did. I mean, she would normally be pretty close to me, but today she'd practically been snuggling against me, and she'd claimed the spot next to me as soon as I'd sat down in the bathtub.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Well...maybe..." She was being evasive. Haruno would normally claim the spot to my other side, but she was giving Clena room today.

"Oh, something did happen..." Roni chimed in. I looked over to her as she scooted toward me and explained the situation in a low voice.

"...Clena got a letter from her mom?"

"Yes, the Torano'o tribe members who had gone to Ceres returned today..." Roni explained.

Clena's mother had sent a letter from Juno's light temple to Ceres, who had passed it on to the White Orchid Corporation in Ares. The demon lord had read the letter and returned it to Ceres, and then it was delivered to the Torano'o tribe, who had visited to trade.

"If Clena's mom sent a letter to the White Orchid Corporation, that must mean..."

"Yes, the Dark Prince made it back to Juno and reunited with Lady Clena's mother," Roni confirmed.

I didn't know the details, but apparently, the letter implied that their reunion had gone well. I was happy to hear it, but why was that making Clena act like this?

"And then...she asked Lady Clena to return to Juno and live with them again," Roni continued.

Oh, that explains it. Clena's original goal in her journey was to discover the truth behind her upbringing. She had already

accomplished her goal, so it wasn't out of the question for her mother to ask her to return. Whether Clena agreed to do so or not was another story though...

"Were you supposed to inherit the family home, Clena?" I asked.

"Huh? Not exactly, but..." Clena looked up at me with an anxious expression.

I guess she doesn't want to go back but isn't sure how to say no. I don't know what things are like between them, but it seems like she wants to be considerate of her mother, and she's been worrying about it to the point that she's gotten like this... Maybe she thinks that if she asks us, we'll tell her to prioritize her family and return to her mother.

"In that case, how about you invite your parents to come live in Hades instead?" I suggested.

Clena raised her head and opened her eyes wide in surprise. "Oh? I wonder... Maybe that could work, considering the Dark Prince's position?"

"From Clena's family's perspective, the Dark Prince sullied their young lady and had a child with her, then fled for over ten years... He might not be so well regarded over there," Haruno said without pulling any punches. She wasn't wrong, though.

I did want Clena to stay by my side, but I didn't want to separate her from her family in doing so. Letting everyone live together was the best compromise.

"If I ask them to come live here after we perform the groundbreaking ceremony and make Hades's restoration official...that might work." Clena's mood seemed to be picking back up. She suddenly realized how closely she'd been clinging to me and tried to pull herself away, but I was one step ahead. I put her in a tight hold with my arms around her waist so that she couldn't get away. She squirmed a little, then gave up and leaned herself against me. "Well, if my mom has forgiven him, then I have nothing more to say."

"If we invite them here, will you acknowledge him as your father?" I asked.

"...I'll think about it," she responded, but she didn't look particularly upset.

Things should turn out all right at this rate.

"Looks like you've worked things out for now. I don't have to hold back anymore, do I?" Haruno grinned at Clena, then scooted herself toward us.

Inviting her family to Hades, huh...? The restoration of Hades means building not only the Pan-Temple, but all the facilities people will need to live here in comfort. The Pan-Temple isn't the final goal here. There's still plenty to work on after that. I was brought to reality again. We were going to build my—no, our—new home country. The first milestone to

accomplish that was the groundbreaking ceremony, which would mark the first major step in the restoration of Hades. We still needed to dismantle the demon lord's castle and prepare for all the guests... There was still plenty of work to be done before the groundbreaking ceremony.

The demolition of the demon lord's castle was completed with time to spare. Apparently, it had been pretty difficult to coordinate an opening in all the attendees' schedules. We had brought a holy messaging tool here, which at least made the communication go faster.

As we finished preparations, the day of the groundbreaking ceremony neared. Our invitees gradually started arriving in Hades.

First, the sacred king's group and the demon lord's group arrived on the same day. Princess Franchellis and the others had actually planned out the timing just in case. The sacred king and demon lord had a history, after all.

The sacred king had arrived with the prince and the elder of the light temple in Jupiter. The demon lord had brought the Demon Dog, the White-Faced Ogre, and the Dark Giant. *I guess they set the Dark Giant free.* The Flame Devil was also with them, but apparently he had tagged along of his own accord.

Next, the Ares royal family and the elder of the earth temple arrived. The rest of the groundbreaking ceremony's attendees trickled in over the next week. Representing the fire temple, the king of Hephaestus arrived with the fire temple's elder and the remaining ten of the twelve families of ketolt blacksmiths. With Pardoe and Shakova already here, all twelve families were now gathered together. They made up the biggest group among all of the temples.

All of the attendees from the temple of wind were already in Hades, and the temple of darkness didn't have any additional attendees in the first place. Now we were just waiting for the attendees from the temple of water...

"Today's your big day, my brother." The Goddess of Water arrived with some white gillman clerics. She appeared the same way as we had seen her at the water capital: she was standing inside a sphere of water and was wearing a mermaid dress with a low neckline. She was going to participate in the groundbreaking ceremony too, but the other attendees hadn't been informed. Members from the temples could sense the power emanating from her, as they looked shocked and started trembling.

All the attendees, including the Goddess of Water, were going to stay inside the Unlimited Bath, but the goddess would be staying with us in the main building on the third floor, while the rest were staying

in the guest rooms surrounding the main building. *There shouldn't be anything to worry about.*

The day of the groundbreaking ceremony arrived, as had all of its attendees. Thanks to us limiting the invitee list, our guests were the most elite of the elite. I was getting ready in the waiting room, but to be honest, I was pretty nervous. It was too late to be getting cold feet now though. It was time to brace myself. Haruno and the rest seemed to see through me and were watching over me warmly. *Am I that easy to read?*

I had decided on the proceedings for the ceremony in my dreams. It would differ from the groundbreaking ceremonies in Japan, but it had the same objective of gaining the goddesses' permission. I had assurance from the goddesses themselves.

Another thing that had taken time for me to decide was my attire for the ceremony. Since this was the groundbreaking ceremony to build a Pan-Temple that would house the six goddesses, I couldn't wear a style or color of robe that evoked any goddess in particular. I ended up dressing in the style of a Japanese Shinto priest. The robe was apparently called a *joue*. It was colored purple, which had been considered a noble color since the time of ancient Japan and didn't overlap with any of the goddesses' colors.

Shinto priests were supposed to carry a baton called a *shaku* as part of their attire, so I carried the Gravesword instead. It was pretty heavy, but it was the best I had. The rest didn't know how to react to my novel appearance, but I considered that a good thing.

The six temple elder candidates were also wearing elegant robes, but they had all been preprepared. Rakti and the Goddess of Water were wearing dresses. Rakti had bought a new black dress for the occasion. According to Yukina, who had picked it out for her, it was both chic and cute at the same time.

The groundbreaking ceremony was being held at the crater where Rakti had once been sealed. Six pillars made of rainbow opal had been placed around the edges of the crater, and a seventh stood in the center. The goddesses had told me to use the pillars at the ceremony in a dream. Lo and behold, the morning after that dream, I had woken up to find the pillars growing from the roots of the rainbow opal tree—that is, the earth altar inside the Unlimited Bath.

Rakti and the Goddess of Water were standing next to two of the six pillars. I put on the eboshi cap, and dressed in the *joue*, I stood at the edge of the crater with the Gravesword in hand. Each of the temple elder candidates stood behind me, and behind them were all the attendees. Farther behind them were the Torano'o tribe and the other current residents of Hades.

All right, it's time. I picked up the Gravesword with both of my

hands, then held it vertically in front of me with the flat side of it facing outward.

“The groundbreaking ceremony will now begin.” I bowed at everyone, faced the crater again, and began walking to its center. I could feel everyone’s anticipation against my back.

When I reached the center of the crater, I held the Gravesword above me, then recited an incantation that the goddesses had taught me. It was a melody that sounded like nothing more than a string of sounds, but this was the language of the gods from long, long ago. Most likely, the only people who could understand its meaning were the ones who could have the words translated by the Goddess of Light’s blessing—Haruno, Cosmos, Kannami, and I.

It was a song that blessed the birth of the world. It was a song that blessed the birth of all things in the world. It was the song of the Goddess of Chaos, who continued to bless all, even though all had forgotten about her.

The goddesses had once said that every living being in this world was blessed by the Goddess of Chaos. We heroes who had been summoned to this world were no exception.

The song—the forgotten song—was one that perpetually enveloped this world in love.

I noticed Rakti’s reflection in the Gravesword being raised above my head. She was looking at me anxiously from the shadow of the pillar. She looked like an older sister watching her younger brother’s first stage performance. She smiled at me slightly, and I could feel a bit of my nervousness fade away.

It’s okay, I can do this. I twirled the Gravesword so that its tip now faced the ground. “This is the final stage of my adventure...!”

I used all the strength I could muster to pierce the Gravesword into the ground of Hades once again, then channeled my MP through the Gravesword into the soil. In the next moment, the seven pillars gave out a bright light, then those beams of light dug into the domed ceiling of Hades. Rakti and the Goddess of Water were absorbed into the pillars.

Next, the ground began to tremble. I heard panicked voices behind me and other voices trying to calm them down.

“L-Look at that!” The yell came from Rulitora. I didn’t have to guess where he was pointing.

Along with a low rumbling sound from the ground, the towers of the sixteen demon generals had begun to move. Space formed between the towers, which allowed light from the sun to shine down on me.

The trembling became more intense. As the ground rumbled, the sixteen towers gradually made themselves upright. The beams of light

had nothing blocking their paths anymore, so they continued rising straight into the heavens, then vanished. The pillars that had given out the light, along with Rakti and the Goddess of Water, had vanished with them.

I didn't have time to react since the trembling had grown strong enough that I couldn't remain standing without the help of the Gravesword. Everyone behind me might have fallen already, besides the demon lord, who was coiled on the ground. Someone was yelling that the ground would fall beneath them. That wouldn't happen, though—it was the opposite. The ground that we were standing on was rising back up, returning to its original form.

By the time the tremors stopped, the towers had returned completely upright. Beyond them, I saw the desolate land of the void. The capital of Hades had returned above ground.

Then, lights rained down from the heavens, forming six pillars that pierced the ground. The lights faded away, and in their places stood the six goddess sisters, including Rakti and the Goddess of Water. The rainbow opal pillars and the Goddess of Chaos's song had brought about new corporeal forms for each of the goddesses. Everyone seemed to realize who the women were, as some gasps of shock arose from behind me.

The six goddesses faced their backs to me and raised their hands as if in prayer. The land of Hades began to glisten. Fire ran through it for a moment, then wind blew it away. Next, water gushed from the ground here and there as plants began to bud then sprout into flowers in the blink of an eye. Before long, the ground was covered in lush grass as far as the eye could see, and the goddesses lowered their hands. They turned around to face me, and a light shone down from the heavens again. This time, it wasn't a pillar, but more like a gentle and warm golden veil.

A small shadow descended from the sky along with the light. Her golden hair was longer than she was tall, and her smile was filled with an all-encompassing affection. Yes—this was the Goddess of Chaos.

I reached out my hand, which the Goddess of Chaos took, and then she lowered herself to the ground.



The Gravesword's job was done, so I drew it from the ground, took the Goddess of Chaos's hand, and turned around to face everyone. Rakti and the other goddesses also lined up to my left and right. All six goddess sisters and their mother were here. Even if the spectators couldn't tell who was who, everyone present must have been able to sense that they were goddesses. The crowd was so shocked that no one even spoke.

I raised the Gravesword high above my head and shouted, "The land of Hades has been brought back to life! I declare the restoration of Hades!"

After another moment of silence, loud cheers erupted from the crowd.

"You did it, Touya!" Haruno, overcome by emotion, ran to me first and leaped into my arms.

"That's my big brother!" Yukina flew over and circled behind me, then hugged me from behind.

"You knew what would happen, didn't you, Touya? You looked calm even when the ground started to shake." Clena came up to me next. She was right on the mark. She stood next to me, acting composed, but then Roni pushed her from the side and she ended up hugging my arm.

"B-Behave yourselves!" Sera scolded us while looking flustered. Sandra sighed while watching us, while Rin cheered at us to keep going.

Rulitora and Dokutora ran up to us next, with Rium, Lumis, Mark, and Daisy on their shoulders. They had climbed up to get a better view during the groundbreaking ceremony.

Prae came up to us a little later, perhaps finding it hard to run in her ceremonial robe. The other cyclopes also joined, offering us words of congratulations while shedding tears.

Shakova, Pardoe, Crissa, and the king of Hephaestus were just staring at us. Brahms and Mem weren't moving either. Maybe they were stuck frozen from the surprise. I looked around and saw other people acting similarly. About half of them looked like they were in a daze. The descent of the goddesses and the revival of Hades must have been that much of an overpowering sight. The remaining half, mainly clergy members and the temple elder candidates, had surrounded the goddesses. Some of them were kneeling on the ground. Phoenix had remained unfazed, however. He was cheering with Cosmos, the Torano'o tribe, and the glaupis. Thanks to that, Rakti skipped over to me.

"It sure is lively, my dear child." The Goddess of Chaos floated herself close to me and started patting my head from above. "This is

the sight you have obtained at the end of your journey. You have done well.”

Prompted by her words, I looked around. Surrounding us were humans, demons, and all sorts of other species gathered in one place. It was a rowdy but peaceful sight. *Right, I—no, all of us—brought this sight to life.*

“Oh? Touya, are you crying?” Yukina asked.

“N-No, I’m not,” I denied. It must have been obvious, but Haruno and Clena didn’t say anything. “But I can say this for sure—this will become my new home.”

The Goddess of Chaos nodded in satisfaction.

We’ve just started building this place, and there’s nothing here yet. But if I look around, everyone is with me.

“Come on, let’s get going. Everyone’s waiting,” Clena urged.

“The groundbreaking ceremony went off without a hitch. It’s time for the party next!” Haruno smiled.

Starting tomorrow, we’ll spend our days revitalizing Hades—our new home. I’m sure it’ll be tough, but we’ll be fine. As long as everyone is here with me, we’ll be able to make it through.

I took a step forward as Haruno and Clena pulled my hands. All of our guests had calmed down by now. After this, we were going to invite everyone inside the Unlimited Bath for a party tonight, with the goddesses as our surprise guests.

Then, after the party...

We were soaking inside the cedarwood tub in the annex building’s bathhouse. In addition to the usual members, the goddesses were with us today, and they were surrounding me on all sides inside this spacious tub.

To my right was Haruno, with her preposterously perfect proportions. To my left was Clena, who was the slightly plump girl-next-door type. Surrounding us were the six goddess sisters. Rakti, who was hiding in the Goddess of Earth’s shadow, peeked out and then jumped toward me. Further surrounding the goddesses were Sera and Rium. Daisy was sitting on Roni’s shoulder. Sandra, Rin, Lumis, and Prae were peering over at me. Lastly, the Goddess of Chaos was looking at me happily from behind everyone.

“My, my. ♪” The Goddess of Chaos stood up in the water with a composed air, then waded over to me. She looked at me with a benevolent smile. “My dear child, don’t stay in that corner. Come over here.”

“Go on now.” “The goddess is waiting for you!” Clena and Haruno laughed and pushed my back.

The Goddess of Chaos opened her arms wide with a grin, but I

didn't jump into those small arms and instead took her hands. Her lips turned downward in mild disappointment, but she quickly recovered and started walking while leading me by the hand.

"Prae, come here!" The Goddess of Wind beckoned from the far end of the bathtub.

"Okaaaay! ♪" Water splashed around as Prae waded over to her. The two of them were already friends, so Prae wasn't wary of her at all. The Goddess of Chaos pulled me in their direction.

"Ahhh, that's the stuff. It's been a while." The Goddess of Wind sighed. Prae had sat her large body down in the tub, and the Goddess of Wind lay down using Prae's two large floating islands as pillows. "Are you jealous, little brother? We can change places if you'd like."

"I'm fine. She always does that for me."

"How cheeky! Take that!"

I tried to decline, but the Goddess of Wind grabbed my arm and pulled me toward her. I landed on Prae and was sandwiched between her twin islands and the Goddess of Wind's comparatively small—but still respectable—mounds.

The Goddess of Chaos laughed and said, "Looks like you're enjoying yourself," while the Goddess of Wind grabbed on to me and started patting my head.

"Mmm, this is what I was missing! It just doesn't feel the same inside those dreams."

The Goddess of Wind had lost her corporeal form just recently. She could still remember what it had felt like, so her sense of deprivation as well as her happiness about getting a new corporal form were both amplified.

"Whuh?!"

After realizing as much, I grabbed on to the Goddess of Wind's slim body and started patting her head back.

"You little brat!" The Goddess of Wind flicked my forehead, her cheeks now red.

"My goddess is so cute! ♥" Prae hugged the both of us after that, making our cheeks squish against each other. Maybe that was more embarrassment than the Goddess of Wind could handle, since she pulled herself away and ran off. Prae followed after her, and then the Goddess of Chaos pulled me over to her again.

Oh yeah, I've been meeting them in my dreams this whole time, but that didn't go for Prae. She's finally reuniting with her friend after a long wait. Their little game of chase was heartwarming when I thought about it that way. Oh, Prae managed to catch her. And trap her in an underarm hold...

Prae walked over to where Daisy and Lumis were. It looked like she wanted to introduce the Goddess of Wind to her friends. Daisy

might have sensed incoming embarrassment since she flew away. Lumis, who remained, acted a little awkward, like she was meeting her friend's mom. Well, the Goddess of Wind did seem like she was more comfortable being treated that way—albeit she wasn't attempting to escape Prae's underarm hold, maybe because she had given up already.

Meanwhile, Daisy had flown off to... *Hey, don't hide inside Haruno's cleavage. I didn't know you could fit in there, actually.* She couldn't fit her entire body inside, so her legs were sticking out from within Haruno's cleavage and dangling around. Haruno caught her and handed her back to Prae. Daisy gave in, and then the two surrendered captives greeted each other. *They already have something in common, so maybe they'll get along.*

I went to the Goddess of Light next, where Sera and Sandra were proactively talking with her. They had told me that they didn't feel worthy enough to speak with the goddess, so I suggested thinking about her as Rakti's older sister, and it seemed like that was working for them.

"If only all of my followers were like you two..." The problem was, the Goddess of Light kept responding to them with complaints. The two girls couldn't weave their way out of the conversation since the source of the goddess's complaints was their fellow believers. Rin had apparently managed to escape since she had waded off to the side.

"That girl always gets like that. I'll go and stop her," said the Goddess of Chaos.

"If you have to come down on her, try to do it gently," I requested.

"Rest assured, a body as soft as mine always comes down gently. ♪" The Goddess of Chaos gave me a playful grin, then flew over. "Baaam!" She jumped onto the Goddess of Light's back and put a stop to their conversation.

I sat myself down next to Sera, who glanced at me and breathed a sigh of relief. She leaned herself against me, so I wrapped my arm around her shoulders, and she relaxed her tensed-up muscles. Sandra must have been exhausted too, since she also came up and leaned against me on the opposite side.

"Oh, this girl is always so serious!" The Goddess of Chaos hugged the Goddess of Light's head and stroked her hair. Despite being the eldest sister, she was no match against her mother. She looked a little embarrassed, but she didn't struggle.

"*Ahem.* You're right, we should talk about something more positive." The Goddess of Light cleared her throat and tried to change the subject while her hair was still being stroked. "You know, the

point of my teachings is...”

She’s moving on to another heavy topic... She really is too serious... This topic was attracting more attention than her complaints though, seeing as Sera and Sandra started leaning forward to hear her out. Everyone here was the earnest type, so they all went well together.

However, since both Sera and Sandra had lifted themselves out of the water, their butts adorned with their clingingly wet yuamigi were now right in front of my face. Sera’s rear was large and round, while Sandra’s was more lean and petite. I wanted to keep enjoying the view, but I realized I shouldn’t, so I took the Goddess of Chaos’s hand and left.

Next, we went to see the Goddess of Fire, who was with Roni. They were having a passionate discussion about cooking.

“Roni, repeat after me! Cooking is about firepower!”

“Cooking is about firepower!”

The Goddess of Chaos said that the Goddess of Fire was surprisingly talented at cooking. *So there was a reason behind her blessing manifesting as a kitchen.* I had my suspicions when I recalled the “godly” setting on the stove though. Considering her followers, I bet she cooked the type of meals that bodybuilders liked to eat.

The Goddess of Fire noticed us, then came over and hugged us as if she were going to start gnawing on my head. Her firm chest was pressing against my face.

“You’d better look forward to it, little bro! Now that I’m here, I’m gonna treat you to loads of my home cooking!” She rained kisses down on our cheeks. She was as rambunctiously physical as she ever was. Maybe she was happier to be out here than inside the dreams.

“This girl likes to feed you a bunch. She cooks large portions, so watch out for yourself,” the Goddess of Chaos nonchalantly warned.

“D-Don’t worry! I’ll help keep an eye out! You shouldn’t overeat!” Roni said. I pretended I didn’t notice the fact that she glanced at Clena when she said that.

The Goddess of Water was a distance away sitting with Rin, who had escaped the Goddess of Light earlier. They were lazily soaking in the tub, paying no mind to the commotions around them. I supposed the Goddess of Water didn’t need her water sphere when she was inside the Unlimited Bath. She beckoned me over, and when I neared, she opened her arms wide.

“Brother, if you must treat our youngest sister as your little sister, then treat me as your little sister too,” she prompted.

I wasn’t expecting the goddess to say that. It had caught Rin off guard too, since she started choking on her own laughter.

“Oh, what a spoiled child you are,” the Goddess of Chaos said with a chuckle.

“I’m not asking you, mother.”

The Goddess of Water disregarded the Goddess of Chaos, then beckoned me over again. She really was on her own wavelength. Rin had regained her composure and awaited my reaction with sparkling, expectant eyes.

How naive. I won’t be flustered by something like this. The Goddess of Water had a fairly slender frame relative to the rest of her sisters, and I wrapped my arms around it without hesitation. She took one of my hands and placed it on top of her head, probably indicating that I should give her head-pats. I gently stroked her pale blue hair, and she responded with a satisfied sigh.

After I patted her for a while, she removed herself from me. “Mmh... Being patted by you wasn’t too bad, brother. Let’s do it again sometime.” Her expression had remained unchanged, but she seemed pleased.

“‘Again’? Are you going to stay in Hades?” I asked.

“Hmm. Let’s expand the underground tunnel that connects to the port and add a canal. That way, I’ll be able to teleport between here and the water capital anytime,” she suggested. She couldn’t stay forever, but if we connected Hades to the ocean, then it’d be easier for her to visit.

“My, will that be a job for me then?” The Goddess of Earth had overheard our conversation and volunteered to help. If we could use her powers to build that canal, it’d save a great deal of work.

Rium and Yukina were with the Goddess of Earth. They had probably sensed that she was good at pampering people, which I could attest to. Rium was nodding off on the Goddess of Earth’s lap, maybe tired from the party. Yukina was puffing out her cheeks from beside them. *I guess she’s upset that I doted on the Goddess of Water like a younger sister.* I could tell from her glare. I drew closer and sat down next to her.

“The Goddess of Water doesn’t know anything!” Yukina said as she scooted closer to me. “You have to ask for compliments while your head gets patted! If you just want to get pampered, then do it like this!”

She wrapped her arms around my neck and pressed her body against mine. Not only the Goddesses of Water and Earth, but also Fire stopped their conversations and started observing us. They seemed to be convinced by Yukina’s argument.

“Also, little sisters don’t need to get into position to be cuddled in the first place! Little sisters are naturally ready for cuddling with their brothers at any time!” Yukina shook her fist.

“I see. What profound knowledge...” The goddesses gathered around her. The Goddess of Earth was still hugging Rium, so they

looked like mother and daughter.

“As a mother though, I naturally want to pat all of your heads.” Now the Mother Goddess herself was joining in. *Is it really okay for Yukina to be a part of this?*

Rium slipped out of the Goddess of Earth’s arms and came over to me. She sat herself on my lap and leaned back on me, so I wrapped my arms around her waist.

“Look at that, she’s a natural,” Yukina pointed out.

“You’re right. She so naturally went over to be hugged...” The goddesses, impressed, all observed Rium while praising her.

“...What is it?” The eldest sister, the Goddess of Light, turned around after feeling stares on her back. *Right—the other goddesses are all little sisters too.*

The elated sisters called Rium over and started raining questions down on her. I assumed they would be there for a while, so I left and leaned against the edge of the tub. Haruno, Clena, and Rakti joined me. Haruno and Clena sat by either side of me, and Rakti sat on my lap.

“What a nice sight...” Haruno said while looking at the lively bath.

“Is this also a ‘sight you obtained at the end of your journey’?” Clena commented.

“I guess it is...” I mumbled.

This was a place where all sorts of different species, including the goddesses, happily gathered together. This sight, which could only be realized when everyone joined together, was the image of the new home country that we were going to build. It was a sight that we should continually strive for.

“Touya?” Rakti was now peering at me.

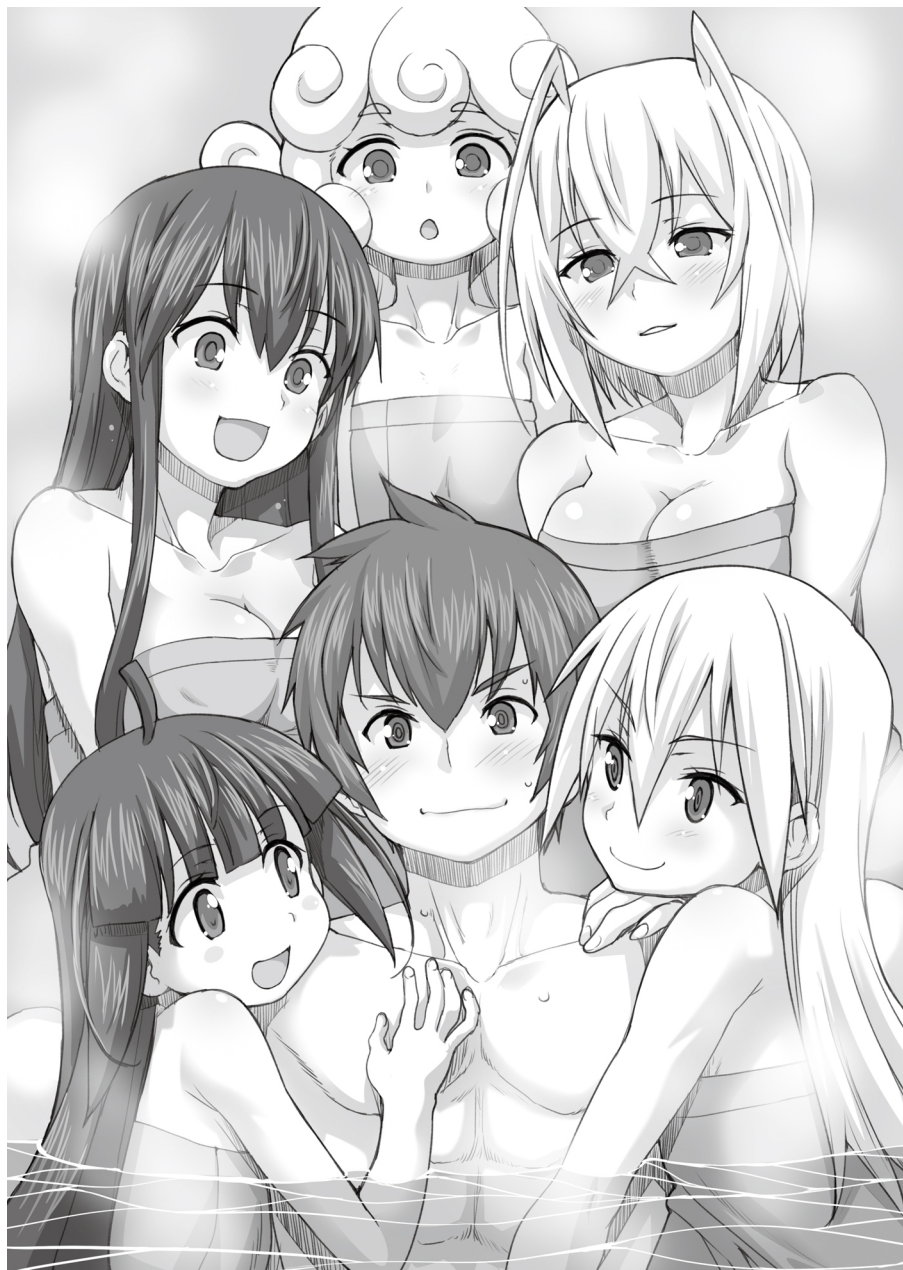
Apparently, I had gotten lost in thought. It wasn’t only Rakti facing me now, but Rium as well. Haruno was to my right, and Clena was to my left. The others had started gathering around as well, looking at me in concern.

I told them that I was fine, to which they returned smiles of relief. The Goddess of Chaos started patting my head, which prompted everyone else to reach their hands out to me. I gripped their hands, which they gripped back, and soon enough, the mood became bright and lively again. We started playing around once more, our skin sometimes brushing against each other.

I looked at everyone smiling and thought to myself, *As long as we’re all together, we can do this. I believe in us.*

We’ll all live together. And I’ll protect everyone’s smiles.

As everyone frolicked around me, newfound determination had settled into my heart.



Post-Bath — The Author's Booth

To everyone picking up *Mixed Bathing in Another Dimension* for the first time: it's nice to meet you. To those of you who've picked the series back up after so long, I'm so sorry to have made you wait, but I've finally delivered the final volume to your hands.

Thank you so much to everyone who's supported me, to Masakage Hagiya for providing the illustrations, to my editor Y, and to everyone involved in the publishing and sales of this book.

The two-page color spread with the mixed bathing scene was drawn with the same composition as the first insert illustration in volume one. Touya's journey, which started from a bath so small that it barely fit two people, reached its destination of the giant mixed bath that he had once vaguely dreamed about. I'm sure the Unlimited Bath will be more lively than ever now that the goddesses are with him.

On the outside, the land of Hades has been revived. However, the restoration itself has just barely started. I'm sure they'll face many challenges moving forward. But Touya has plenty of trusty comrades with him, including the goddesses themselves, so don't worry. I'm sure they'll face those challenges with smiles and overcome them all.

Mixed Bathing in Another Dimension was my first published work, so I also faced a lot of challenges throughout its creation. I remember back during volume one, I had trouble cutting down the text from the web version so that the print version would end at a good stopping point while also fitting within the page limitations. If you line up all the volumes together, you'll find volume one and this volume are a bit thicker than the rest.

I also remember feeling touched seeing the illustrations of Touya and all the characters for the first time, like it was confirmation that my book really was going to be published. I was most touched by all the feedback I received online though. If it weren't for all of your support, I wouldn't have made it all the way here.

Mixed Bathing in Another Dimension is now complete, but I plan to continue writing novels. I hope to see you all again in my new work...

Nagaharu Hibihana, March 2022.

A picture was worth a thousand words. I summoned a "gate" from the empty space behind me. It was larger and distinctly different from the door to the Unlimited Bath.

GODDESS
OF
CHAOS

"WHAT IN THE
WORLD?! I'VE
NEVER SEEN
THIS BEFORE!"





A young man with brown hair and a black hat, wearing a blue robe, is shown from the chest up. He is holding a sword with a blue hilt and a green blade. He has a determined expression with wide eyes and a small open mouth. The background is a dark purple with several bright blue energy beams or light rays emanating from behind him. The text "THIS IS THE FINAL STAGE OF MY ADVENTURE!!" is written in white, stylized capital letters across the middle of the image.

"THIS IS THE
FINAL STAGE
OF MY
ADVENTURE!!"

I used all the strength I could muster to pierce the Gravesword into the ground of Hades once again, then channeled my MP through the Gravesword into the soil.



Bonus Short Stories

Other Dimension Little Sister Championship

“Hey, Touya...” Yukina said to me in a serious tone while we were in the bath one day. “Who’s more of a little sister, me or Rakti?”

“I’m the *older* sister!” Rakti quickly protested, but that wasn’t a very convincing argument when she was making it from atop my lap.

“What do you mean by ‘more of a little sister’?” I asked.

“As in...who behaves more like a little sister?”

Does she mean who’s cuter? In my mind, they were both my cute little sisters, but I was betting they wouldn’t be satisfied by that answer. I mean, Rakti was still insisting that she was my older sister.

“I’m the big sister! You’re comparing apples and oranges!” Rakti protested again.

“You say that, but you’re behaving plenty like a little sister snuggling on Touya’s lap like that. I’m a professional, so I can tell.”

“A professional?!”

Yukina was my little sister by blood before she was reincarnated into this world, so I guess it makes sense to call her a professional?

“N-No, I’m just...fulfilling my little brother’s wishes! As his older sister!” Rakti insisted.

So she says. It is true that I’ve been asking her to come over more often ever since she started putting up that tough older sister front though.

Well, this argument isn’t getting anywhere. I should get in between them before their spat makes waves in more than just the bathwater.

“What’s up, Yukina? Why are you worried about this all of a sudden?” I questioned.

“Well, whenever I look at Rakti, I keep thinking that she’s my rival,” Yukina answered earnestly.

“Actually, you can call me ‘big sis’ too, Yukina.”

“No, I’d rather not.”

“Why not?!”

That caused some sort of fire to light up within Rakti. She got up from my lap, stood in front of Yukina, and spread her arms wide. “Come here!” she said. She was trying to convey that she wanted to pamper Yukina like a big sister.

“Gah!” In response, Yukina groaned like she’d taken damage.

“That big sister act of yours packs some incredible little sister power!”

“‘Little sister power’?!” Rakti seemed surprised by her reaction,

but I was on Yukina's side here. "Touya, can you say something?!" Rakti turned around to ask me for help, but then she froze still. Her eyes fell on Rium, who had scooted over and claimed my lap as soon as Rakti had gotten up.

"S-Since when...?!" Yukina was also caught off guard, since her attention had been entirely on Rakti.

"Mmm..." Paying no mind to the other girls, Rium turned herself around, wrapped her arms around my neck, and snuggled against me. She also pressed her cheek into me, letting herself be pampered as always.

"Gah, what amazing little sister power...!" Yukina exclaimed in shock.

"Um, what's 'little sister power,' anyway?" Rakti asked, but Yukina ignored her and continued talking.

"We can't lose to her! Rakti, let's double-team this!"

"Huh? Um, okay."

Yukina jumped onto me from the right, and after a moment of hesitation, Rakti jumped onto me from the left.

"Huh?" And then, Rakti realized what she had just done. "Um..." She timidly raised her head and glanced at me. She was wondering if she should continue clinging onto me or pull away.

"Pretty impressive, Rium... You're a respectable little sister too," Yukina said.

Meanwhile, Yukina and Rium seemed to have come to some sort of mutual understanding. Rium had a proud look on her face.

Next, the two girls looked at Rakti.

"Rakti... Let's keep developing our little sister power together," Yukina proposed.

Rium also nodded. They were acting as if they were comrades in arms.

"Like I said, I'm the *older* sister!" Rakti objected, yet she didn't let go of me.

So it went for my cute older sister. She packed a lot of little sister power.

Memories ~Once upon a Time~

"Touya! ♪"

I raised my head to see Yukina fly into the room, literally.

"Huh? Are you reading again?" she asked.

"I wanted to make use of my free time while I'm on break."

We were currently inside the Grande Nautilus sailing from Ares to Hephaestus. Simply getting a good night's sleep was no longer enough to alleviate my exhaustion, so I was following everyone's advice to

take time to relax.

“Hmm...” Yukina hugged me from behind and peered into the book I was holding. She furrowed her eyebrows. “Ugh, there’s so many words...”

That’s the case with all the books in this world, Yukina. I suppose they do have something like art books too though...

“Is there anything like manga here?” Yukina asked.

“There are some picture scrolls, if that counts,” I answered.

“I’m not talking about the predecessor of manga.”

I had gotten those scrolls in Ares. Maybe the demon lord’s army brought the concept into this world.

Yukina shuffled up in front of me, then sat leaning her back against my chest. She positioned herself so that her wings didn’t get in the way, then she wrapped her tail around my body. I put down my book in response.

“Don’t mind me, Touya,” she said.

“Then what did you sit down here for?”

“Huh? Just to cuddle,” Yukina answered as she leaned into me.

I see. She just came here to spend time with me. I wrapped my arms around her waist to grant her wish.

“Oh yeah, there was a manga that I wanted to read the continuation of... I think,” Yukina reminisced.

“Do you remember what it was about?” I asked.

“Hmm...it’s a bit fuzzy.”

I wondered whether her hazy memory was a side effect of being reincarnated, but in the end, it seemed like she had merely just forgotten the details of the manga over time. Even so, remembering that she’d enjoyed reading it gave her the itch to read manga again.

“You know, if people were to draw manga in this world, I’d like to try reading them,” Yukina mused.

“It’d be hard to explain what manga are without an actual example,” I pointed out. *We’d have to draw one ourselves to explain what they are.*

“That figures,” Yukina laughed, probably not expecting her wish to come to fruition.

“Oh, this one looks nice.” Yukina picked up a book with several illustrations inside—a children’s book. “Hey, read this with me! ♪”

“All right, all right.”

Our conversation reminded me of when Yukina was young, and it seemed like she was thinking the same thing. We read the picture book together the same way we did back then—she read out all the lines of the girl characters, and I read out the rest. *I wonder if there’s a way to give Yukina manga to read again,* I thought.

At that time, I had no idea that a spell that could make her wish

come true existed...

Reaching Out to Stars in the Dark

One day, in the middle of the voyage from Ares to Hephaestus, Clena visited Touya's room. Touya wasn't present, but she had only dropped by to return a book that she'd borrowed, so she went inside anyway and put the book on the shelf. As she was about to leave the room, she stopped in her tracks when her eyes fell on a certain object.

A katana was propped up in the room. It was the Hoshi-kiri, the katana that the demon lord had given Touya.

The original katana of the same name had been given to the person whom the demon lord had named his heir. In other words, it was a symbol of being the demon lord's successor. And now, Touya had been given a katana with the same name. What did that imply?

It may have been too much to say that it was proof that Touya was the demon lord's heir. However, it was at least proof that the demon lord approved of Touya.

After thinking as much, Clena, the demon lord's granddaughter, felt her cheeks turn red.

"Th-That must be what it means..."

One word emerged in her mind: marriage.

The demon lord had told Touya to make his own decisions on that subject. However, that also implied that the demon lord wouldn't make any objections to Touya's choices. *Since the only thing standing in the way is whether we want to do it, the marriage is basically a done deal, right?* she thought.

"Wait, that's not...!!!" Clena raised her voice to object to the conclusion that she herself had just come to. "Touya's feelings matter too! It's not just about me!"

She wasn't wrong, but maybe she was overthinking things a little.

"Um, is something wrong? I heard a yell." Roni suddenly peeked inside the room. She saw Clena acting flustered in front of the Hoshi-kiri and quickly guessed the situation, then she flashed Clena a warm smile.

"Wh-Why are you looking at me like that? Nothing's wrong," Clena said, but her face was red to her ears at this point. The more she talked, the more she dug herself into a hole. Having realized as much, she shouted, "L-Let's get going! I'm done here," and pushed Roni out the door with her. She decided to take Roni with her to the tatami room to calm herself down, failing to fully consider that decision.

"Oh, Sir Touya," Roni said.

However, the room already had a visitor—Touya was sleeping on the tatami floor. Clena had heard that he'd been tired lately. He must

have come here to rest.

“U-Um...” Clena stammered.

“Oh, let me prepare some drinks!” Roni made the first move since Clena had stopped in her tracks. She left the room, leaving Clena alone with Touya.

Clena remained frozen in place. She still had a lot on her mind after seeing the Hoshi-kiri earlier.

“Mm...?” Touya turned over. He let out a murmur, perhaps sensing that Clena was there.

He's tired, so I shouldn't wake him up, Clena thought, quickly getting closer to him and sitting down.

“Put your head here...” She gently lifted his head and placed it on her lap—a lap pillow, as it's known. She peered at his face, made sure that he hadn't woken up, and heaved a sigh of relief. He must have been mumbling in his sleep just now. “Jeez, not everyone gets to sleep on the lap of the demon lord's granddaughter, you know?”

Clena had finally calmed herself down. She stroked Touya's hair and poked his cheek while slackening her expression into a grin. That might have woken him up, seeing as he turned over again. Clena rested her hand against his head so that he wouldn't fall from her lap.

“Clena...?”

“G-Good morning. Um, you seemed tired, so...” Clena rushed to explain.

In contrast, Touya turned to face downward and wrapped his arms around her waist, then buried his face into her thighs. It was hard to tell if he had woken up or was still in a half-dreaming state.

“Hey, that tickles!” Clena said, but she didn't look displeased. She gently stroked his hair, and he nodded off again. He really did seem tired. She wanted to let him rest, but her legs would wear out like this.

“Excuse me.” She gently removed his head from her lap and replaced it with a pillow. Then, she grabbed another pillow.

Lap pillows are nice, but this isn't bad either, Clena thought as she lay down next to Touya. Right on cue, Touya turned over again and hugged Clena. *He must be awake*, she thought, but she just giggled and snuggled her face against his chest.

“Honestly, Lady Clena... ♥” Roni watched over the two of them from outside the room.

Chilled Gourmet ~Practical Uses for the Unlimited Bath #6~

This is a story from when we stayed in Ares. Yukina and I were walking around the city, but...it was hot. Since it was an underground

city, it should have been cooler than the surface, but I guessed it couldn't keep all the heat out.

"Touya, I want ice cream," Yukina suddenly said.

I wished I could be the trusty big brother who could treat her to ice cream here, but unfortunately, ice cream didn't exist in this world. That meant that we had to make it ourselves...

"You can make it as long as you have the ingredients," Haruno said. I had asked Haruno about it after we returned, and she told me that she knew the recipe. "You'll need milk, eggs..."

The Unlimited Bath can't generate those, but they're easy enough to obtain.

"...sugar..."

That's considered a luxury in this world, but the Goddess of Earth's quern-stone can generate it.

"...and heavy cream."

"Heavy cream?" *I haven't seen that for sale anywhere. Come to think of it, they have pancakes in this world, but I haven't come across any shortcakes.* Haruno seemed to have noticed the same thing. "Hmm... Do you know how to make heavy cream?" I asked her.

"I do, but...it takes a long time to make," she replied. "You'll have to whisk it afterward too."

"That won't be a problem." The Goddess of Fire's kitchen had a stand mixer. It was powered not by electricity, but by my MP.

And so, Yukina, Haruno, and I tried to make ice cream in the kitchen. We separated heavy cream from milk overnight, whisked the ingredients together, and placed the results inside the freezer of the Goddess of Wind's refrigerator.

"That took the power of almost all the gifts," Haruno commented after we shut the door of the freezer and began waiting for our work to harden.

"It sure did. If only milk came out of the Goddess of Water's faucet too," I replied.

"How about we make sherbet next?" Yukina suggested.

Haruno and I looked at each other. *That's right. The faucet can produce orange juice. We have sugar, so we should be able to make sherbet too.* "All right, let's give it a shot." *We might as well while we're here.*

"Can we use apple juice too?" Yukina asked.

"Oh, I know a recipe that uses tea..." Haruno added.

Now we had a lot more to make. *We might as well make everything we can and treat everyone.*

"Hmm. So this is a dessert from your world," said Clena.

"I haven't seen anything like this before. It's cold and delicious!"

Roni remarked.

The ice cream and sherbet received rave reviews.

“Ouch!” After scarfing down on ice cream for the first time in a long time, Yukina experienced a brain freeze. Rium and Daisy were also clutching their heads.

“Ahh... Touya, do you think we can sell this?” Yukina suggested after recovering.

There’d definitely be demand for this in the hot nation of Ares. It’s not a bad idea.

“Okay, to the White Orchid Corporation!” I declared.

“Not so fast.” Clena stopped me. “We’re not going to be in Ares forever. What are you thinking, going and letting the people here get a taste of something like this?”

“Oh... Yeah, you have a point.”

We’d develop new demand by selling ice cream and sherbet, but after we leave, there won’t be any more supply to meet the demand. Or, at least, the supply would increase in cost. It might not be impossible for others to make...

“You could call that a type of market manipulation,” Haruno commented. She was right. It might not have been a bad thing, but it was irresponsible.

“Let’s not, then...” I acquiesced.

“Don’t do it,” Clena insisted.

And so, the ice cream and sherbet, which was made using all the different features of the Unlimited Bath, remained a personal treat for us. *Well, that’s fine as long as Yukina is happy.*

On that note, we also treated the demon lord’s cohort to the chilly dessert when they visited on a later day.

While Gazing at Your Sleeping Face

One day, during the voyage from Ares to Hephaestus, Haruno invited Touya to play in the Unlimited Bath’s pool. She had hoped that they’d be alone, but that was naive. Yukina, Rakti, Rium, Prae, and Sandra joined them to make it a seven person get-together.

“This is going to be a lively group,” Haruno murmured as she looked over who’d gathered.

Right after arriving at the pool, the younger girls grabbed Touya to play. Touya entertained them for a while, but he eventually tired himself out and passed the baton to Sera. She was used to this, having looked over the children in the temple back in Jupiter.

In the meantime, Touya went to relax poolside. Haruno approached and sat down next to him.

“Thanks for all this, Touya,” Haruno said.

“I’m having fun, so don’t worry about it.” Touya smiled.

He really has the makings of an older brother, Haruno thought. She loved that smile of his, and she wanted to be pampered by him too. However, he seemed worn out right now, so she didn’t want to bother him either.

After thinking for a moment about what to do, she came up with an idea. There was one way to both let him rest and let her be pampered.

“Here, Touya, lie down.”

She prompted Touya to lie down, then she lay down next to him and snuggled up against him. He could have a good rest like this.

“Let’s take a nap together,” she suggested.

Touya softly smiled and shifted his arm upward.

Is he letting me use his arm as a pillow? He really is an older brother. Haruno lifted her head and played along with his idea.

“Am I heavy?” she asked.

“Not at all.”

The two of them stayed like that for a while. Haruno started to nod off, but then she felt a drop of water fall on her face. She opened her eyes to find that everyone else was now surrounding them. Sera and Rakti hadn’t wanted to bother them, but Yukina and Rium were staring at them in envy. Haruno hastily sat up.

“Hm...?”

However, Touya hadn’t moved. Haruno brought her face closer to his and heard soft, even breaths. He had actually fallen asleep at some point. Haruno brought her index finger to her lips. The others nodded in response, not saying a word.

“He’s sound asleep. Was he that tired?” Sera said, touching Touya’s cheek. He didn’t seem like he would wake up anytime soon. Haruno wanted to let him sleep like this, but she worried he might catch a cold if he stayed here, even if they were within the shelter of the Unlimited Bath.

And so, everyone entrusted Prae with carrying Touya to the bedroom on the top floor of the main building. She carried him daintily so as not to wake him, and the rest followed behind.

Along the way, Haruno came to a realization that halted everyone following Prae to the bedroom. “He needs to be changed out of his swimsuit too...”

Sparks flew between a few of the girls—or at least that was how it felt. A competition took place to decide who would change him. Ultimately, after running the gauntlet of rock paper scissors, drawing lots, and a staring contest, Haruno emerged victorious, and she skipped to the bedroom to claim her prize.

“Oh...?” She discovered Touya and Prae sleeping together under

one blanket. Prae herself had considered how she might keep Touya from catching a cold, apparently concluding that she could keep him warm with her own body. Indeed, her method was sound; Haruno felt like she had been outsmarted.

“Well then...don’t mind me.”

Nonetheless, Haruno was the type to take any opportunities she had. *If that’s how it is*, she thought as she crawled under the blanket covering the two, embraced Touya, and closed her eyes.

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Mixed Bathing in Another Dimension: Heavenly Bath of the Seven
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by Nagaharu Hibihana

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Edited by Zubonjin

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